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OR,

THE SPY of the SECRET SERVICE.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," "NOR-
WEST NICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GATHERING IN THE GLEN.

"WHAT'S the prospect, Bion Barnave—good or bad?"

"It could hardly be worse."

Sharp the question and terse the answer, but both were comprehensive enough for the dark-browed men who gathered around. The half-eager, half-anxious look faded from each face, giving place to frowns of sullen anger and dogged resolution, all the more impressive from the perfect silence with which the unwelcome news was received.

"Fer us, or fer Owen Tredgold?"

"For both. The bloodhounds of the law have him foul, and they make no bones of boasting that before the world is a week older, they will have us one and all in the same nasty box."

"Ketchin' comes afore hangin', an' all that opens on the trail won't live to see the kill."

A TALL, PHANTOM-LIKE FIGURE STOOD BEFORE HIM—WITH A FACE WHITE AND GHASTLY—
THE FACE OF PENDY ROWELL, THE MURDERED REVENUE DETECTIVE.

A low muttering came from the lips of the men gathered about, as though they could both understand and appreciate this sentiment. Faint though the sound was, it did not escape the ears of the speaker, whose greenish-gray eyes turned quickly around the little circle.

A gathering of ragamuffins, the casual observer might have been tempted to pronounce it; and so far as garb and outward appearance went, there was ample ground for this decision.

More rags than whole garments, with here and there a patch that told of home and loving hands. Clothes of homespun, with here and there a suit or a garment that smacked of war and fighting—of the days long gone by, when brother faced brother in the fierce heat of a fiercer civil war.

Here a military hat, still recognizable, though long since shorn of its braid, its tassels, its insignia. Yonder a coat, a jacket, a pair of trousers of military cut.

For the most part men of middle age, with here and there an exception—one whose head showed the frosts of coming age, or one whose flaxen locks and beardless cheeks told of manhood attained "since the war."

Each man bearing weapons that also spoke of the past conflict; carbines of the cavalry, muskets of the infantry, and revolvers that had seen service on many a hard-fought field, with here and there a long, slender-stocked "squirrel-rifle," whose tiny bullet could deal out death as surely, if not quite so far, as the larger-bore tools.

All this was revealed by the red glow of the fire which was burning inside the little circle of bushes down in the glen.

It was night, and though the stars were visible, and the nearly-full moon was above the horizon, down there in the valley all seemed intensely dark outside the little circle of light cast around by the crackling flames.

At that low muttering John Mahar glanced quickly around the little gathering, his head nodding slightly, as though recognizing that unspoken demand.

"Ef it was good news, it'd be different; but we've got too well used to bad to worry down the man that fetches it. Take your time, an' tell it all your own way, Bion Barnave. We'll chaw on it as ye go 'long, until we git the true flavor."

"The flavor o' ruined homes, broken hearts, an' dead men!" harshly muttered one of the party.

"It don't all come from our side—that last," grimly laughed John Mahar, his green eyes flashing vividly.

"I don't call them men—bloodhounds comes nigher the mark—but I ax the dogs' pardon fer the insult, all the same."

"There was a laugh at this speech, short, harsh, unmirthful. It told how fully the crowd sympathized with the gaunt speaker. It told how surely they felt themselves in the right, even though they were generally regarded by outsiders as little, if any, better than outlaws."

Bion Barnave, tall, dark, handsome, with a fierce sort of masculine beauty, glanced quickly from face to face, his own hard-set, his eyes gleaming and glittering with a light that was almost the color of the ruddy flames. His mustached lips curled back from his teeth until a narrow white line was visible. His hands clinched tightly, and a nervous quivering perceptibly shook his athletic figure.

It was plain enough to see that he sympathized with the speakers, and that he was by no means unwilling to show as much, even before his full, rich tones broke forth:

"If you look at the common hounds in that light, what do you think of the one who cheers them on the trail? What of the dastards who point out the prey? Who crouch under cover to save their vile hides, while danger lasts, only to creep forth and reap the reward offered for betraying their fellow-men? What of those—devils?"

There was no reply in words, but the low, ominous growl that came instead, was answer enough, even for him.

John Mahar made an impatient gesture as he spoke again:

"It ain't what we *think*, but what we've got to *do*. An' that we kin settle better when you tell us all you've discovered down-country, Bion Barnave."

"I could wish it was better news!"

"The change o' diet would turn all our stomachs, I reckon!" grimly muttered Mahar, with the ghost of a smile on his rugged features.

One of the party moved a step nearer to Bion Barnave, his voice harsh and brusque as he spoke:

"We sent you down to l'arn the truth. It hain't killed you to find it out, an' I reckon we kin b'ar it as well. Anyways, I'm willin' to risk my sheer."

"You are always ready to do your share of talking, at least, Mark Tappan, whether—"

"Drat it right thar, mates!" sternly cried John Mahar, stepping between the two men, a dark frown upon his rugged face. "We hev enemies enough to fight, the good Lord knows, 'thout cuttin' 'mongst our own selves. Drop it,

I say! Bridle your tongue, Mark Tappan. An' you, Bion Barnave, git down to business; that's what we come here to-night fer, an' time is a-passin' rapid."

"I'm not spoiling for a row," slowly muttered the spy, with a faint smile as he glanced into the face of the other, "but I've gone through with too much down yonder to have the sores rubbed afresh. At best, playing the spy is a thankless job, and when it comes to having insinuations—"

"Sinuate nothin'!" growled Tappan. "All I wanted was to know jest what we've got to expect from them revenue houn's."

"That puts a different complexion on it, and here's my hand, mate," frankly uttered Barnave, stepping forward and crossing hands with the gaunt mountaineer.

He stepped nearer to the center, stirring up the brands with his foot as he gazed keenly, quickly around the group of rough-clad men.

"All true-blue, I reckon!" he muttered, with what seemed like a sigh of relief.

"You wasn't lookin' fer an enemy 'mongst us, Bion?" a little sharply asked John Mahar.

"Would it be the first time a rōgue stole among honest men?" with a shrug of his shapely shoulders, and a peculiar smile upon his dark, handsome face. "Is it a stranger that ever sells us out to the law?"

"What is it you're tryin' to git at, mate?" slowly asked Mahar.

"Simply taking precautions which you will understand better when you have heard my report," bowed the spy, still with that curious, half-mocking smile.

"It isn't us that keeps you waitin', anyway."

"Nor will I task your patience any longer. You know what I went to Greenville for?"

"To l'arn how Owen Tredgold was comin' 'long, an' what was in the wind that consarned us an' our business," was the prompt response.

"A double duty which I believe I have performed; if not to your satisfaction, blame the facts, not me," laughed the spy, shortly.

"It's the facts we're waitin' fer, ef you kin ever git 'em out!"

"First, as to Owen Tredgold," spoke the spy, his entire demeanor changing, his voice growing grave and earnest, his face losing its smile as he added: "I'm afraid he's in a mighty bad way, although it's only vague rumors that gets out about the evidence against him. He has been held for trial, anyway!"

A chorus of exclamations broke from the mountaineers, and the red light of the fire showed dark and angry frowns upon their faces.

"On what grounds? Who dared to sw'ar lies ag'in' him?" fiercely cried John Mahar.

"That is kept secret, as though the informer feared his reward would take another shape than gold," with a short, hard laugh.

"Hot lead or cold steel—cuss him!"

"A rope that he's trying to twist fer the throat o' the boss!" growled another of the mountaineers.

"You found out his name, I reckon?" asked Mahar.

"If not, it wasn't for lack of trying, be sure of that," promptly replied the spy, with a frown. "I tried so hard that I found myself under suspicion. I was dogged by night and by day, and my every movement noted. I hardly expected to get out of town without being placed under arrest."

"Held fer trial!" muttered Mahar, passing a bony hand across his wrinkled brow with a puzzled air. "But he never done it—Owen didn't! He never hurt a ha'r o' that revenue critter's head! Everybody knows he didn't do it! Why, he couldn't—Owen couldn't!"

"No one believes it who knows the man, of course," quietly uttered the spy, his red lips curling a little at the simplicity of the gaunt mountaineer. "But it is not a friend who swears against him, and when an enemy seeks the life of a man, he is not apt to stick at a lie or two. On the streets you can easily get bets of five to one that Owen Tredgold hangs for murdering Pandy Rowell."

"He won't hang—it'll never come to that!" grated Mahar, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Again that peculiar smile.

"So I heard whispered by a select few, in town. They said Owen Tredgold would not even be brought to trial; or, if he was that no one would appear to bear witness against him."

"Thank the good Lord fer that!" impulsively cried Mahar. "May it come true, say I!"

"Those same whisperers went further than that," slowly added the spy. "They said that when Owen Tredgold left the dock, it would be to give place to scores of other men from this same region. That he was bargaining to save his neck by selling out his friends and fellow—"

"Take keer, Bion Barnave!" grated Mahar, his huge fists doubling up and his eyes flashing warningly. "Pick your words keerfully, boy!"

His was the only voice that put the warning into words, but on almost every face surrounding him the spy could read that same sentence. Yet he never flinched from those menacing looks. He drew his tall figure more erect, the

smile upon his face, that peculiar light gleaming in his dark eyes, his tones steady and even as he added:

"They are not my words, but those of our enemies. I simply report what I saw and heard, as in duty bound, since you chose me to investigate this matter. I am not accusing Owen Tredgold of turning traitor to his neighbors. I would sooner suspect you—or myself!"

"Heap sooner!" impulsively ejaculated Mahar, brushing a hand over his beaded brow. "Owen ain't no turn-coat. He wouldn't squeal on his fri'nds. It's all a durned lie!"

"A truer, purer, whiter man never drew the breath of life!" cried Bion Barnave, his handsome face lighting up brightly. "But why waste breath in saying this to you who know Owen Tredgold so well?"

"Not a mite o' use, lad," laughed Mahar, grasping the hand of the spy, and wringing it warmly. "I was a fool fer thinkin' you could say aught ag'in' Owen. Look over my hot words, won't ye, Bion?"

"I never heard them, neighbor," laughed Barnave; but turning grave in an instant as he added: "All the same, there is treachery at work, and unless we can guard against it by ferreting out the traitor, we'll find ourselves in pretty near as bad a box as Tredgold himself."

"What is it? Anythin' new?" anxiously asked Mahar.

"Nothing more than that some one living in this very section is selling all our secrets to the revenue officers!"

Sharp, angry exclamations drowned his voice as the mountaineers swayed back and forth, all talking at once, all grasping weapons savagely as they glanced from face to face, looking for the traitor even in their nearest friends.

John Mahar, though no less moved than the others, sharply commanded silence. When this was restored he spoke to the spy:

"You *know* this, Bion Barnave? It ain't only suspicion?"

"That there is such a traitor among us, I know, positively."

"Mebbe you kin put a han'le to him, Bion?"

Quietly, almost gently came the words, but there was death in the greenish-gray eyes of the tall mountaineer as he waited for the reply.

Bion Barnave hesitated for a brief space, his handsome face paling just a trifle as his dark eyes roved swiftly over those stern faces.

"Ef you know it *fer sure*, spit it out, lad," added Mahar, grimly.

"I know the man rumor said was a traitor," slowly responded the spy, steadying his voice by an effort. "But when I heard it, I swore to myself that they lied in their throats. Not even to save his life—"

"You don't mean Owen Tredgold?"

"That was the name I heard coupled with the rumor, but, as I said at the beginning, I knew it was all a lie—at least so far as *he* was concerned. That I believe it still—listen, friends!"

"I will lead a party of good men down to Greenville, and tear Owen Tredgold from the bloodhounds of the law! Who will volunteer?"

"It ain't who'll go, but it's who'll dar' stay behind!" cried one sturdy mountaineer, his eyes flashing threateningly over the group.

"He wants to say his pray'rs fu'st, anyway!" chimed in another.

And then, as one man, the crowd joined in the cheer which arose from the sturdy lungs of the first speaker. Only John Mahar held back, a grim smile playing about his thin lips as he faced the dark, doubting glances of his neighbors as his silence was noted.

"Wait until the right time comes, mates, an' see then who'll be the fu'st one in the gap," he said coolly.

"Why wait?" impetuously cried Barnave, his eyes flashing. "Why leave a friend and neighbor to suffer shame and degradation when by running a little risk we can save him from it all? Now is the time! We can do the job—we can get him off before the trial if—"

"Mebbe we could, but what would it come to?" coldly interrupted Mahar. "The blood-houn's would take after him, double-ht. The hull State wouldn't be big enough to hold him in peace. Ef he tried to stay whar he was raised, he'd be like a deer afore the houn's."

"Then we are to let him be hung for a crime he never committed?"

"Not that," was the prompt retort. "We're to give him a chance to git cl'ar through the law. Ef that chance fails him—ef he is convicted by lyin' enemies an' sentenced to death or imprisonment—then we'll set him free spite o' the law an' all its houn's. That is sworn to, so help me high Heaven!"

The manner of the speaker, more than his words, seemed to carry conviction to the minds of his fellow mountaineers, and even Bion Barnave seemed deeply impressed with the wisdom of the other's advice.

He stepped forward and once more grasped the hand of Mahar, his tones a little unsteady as he muttered:

"You are right and I was wrong, o'd friend; but you can make allowances when you reflect just how I am situated. You all, neighbors—turning to the rest, his eyes aglow—"know of the dear hopes I have entertained for years—"

which I still entertain, despite all that has passed of late. You know that I love Owen Tredgold as a son loves a kind father. You know, too, that it is not my fault if he is not now a father, in law if not by blood. And knowing this, you can understand why I am so anxious to save Owen Tredgold from imprisonment, from the shame of having to stand a trial for life—and he innocent of the crime laid at his door."

Silence followed this speech. A silence that was peculiar, awkward. A silence which Bion Barnave had no difficulty in rightly interpreting, though he gave no sign.

It was perfectly true that could Bion Barnave have had his way in this, Owen Tredgold would have become his father in the eyes of the law long before the present time. It was not his fault that pretty Lida Tredgold was not now his wife. Certainly he had not been a laggard in his wooing, and until the return of Glenn Elliston to the home of his childhood, hardly one of all those who knew Barnave and the Tredgolds but believed such a union would surely take place at no distant day in the future.

Why not? If Bion Barnave was not rich, neither was Owen Tredgold. The war had left little for either, save their rude mountain homes. All slaves and other property had taken to itself wings; but what of that? They were young, handsome, of suitable age. Why not marry?

Because "love goes where it wills, not where it is sent."

It was natural enough, then, that the thoughts of nearly every one present reverted to Glenn Elliston during that brief interval of silence, and just as natural that John Mahar should utter the words:

"Did you see anythin' of young Elliston down thar, Bion?"

Still, it was a rather awkward question to put, under the circumstances, and honest John realized this the moment the words passed his lips. But if there was a sting in the question, Bion Barnave showed nothing of it as he coldly replied:

"I saw him, yes. And that brings me back to what I said at first: the revenue sharks are getting ready for hot work up in this quarter."

The mountaineers interchanged swift glances, not all of angry apprehension. Even then more than one felt a vague wonder why the mention of Glenn Elliston's name should so abruptly recall the spy to that particular point of his report. But, of course, it could only be chance; he naturally would wish to evade such an awkward question.

"My duty was two-fold, as you know," rapidly added the spy, his tones hard and sharp. "I learned all I could about Tredgold's case, as the most pressing, but I by no means neglected the other half. Never mind the details; it is enough that I found out positively that the bloodhounds intend making an extensive raid in this quarter. They have received information which leads them to boast of a coming sensation. Some of them have gone so far as to say that before this moon is old, fully a dozen illicit stills will be broken up, and the owners placed where the dogs can't bite 'em!"

"They didn't leak the name o' the cur that turned informer?" John Mahar asked, his jaws set firmly, his eyes gleaming ominously.

There was no immediate response. Eyes opened more widely as they saw Bion Barnave hesitate, his face flushing hotly, only to pale until it showed almost ghastly in the firelight.

"They did! You know the p'izen critter, lad?" grated Mahar.

With an evident effort the spy responded:

"I know the man. Wait!" as the mountaineers surged forward with cries and growls of deadly vengeance. "Swear that you will keep the secret until other proof can be brought to back my words. Swear that you will take no action on my word alone, or I'll never utter the name of the one who is selling you to death or imprisonment!"

"But ef you've got the proof, lad?"

"There must not be even a ghost of a doubt left in your minds. Swear what I ask, or the secret dies with me!"

Before a word could be spoken in response, there came a crackling among the bushes up the bank, and then a human figure rolled end over end down into their very midst!

CHAPTER II.

A LIFE AT STAKE.

ON that same evening, Lida Tredgold was waiting and watching, her pretty face pale and anxious, her eyes straining themselves by the moonlight as they gazed down the slope and away over the moderately level ground beyond the range of hills.

"He will come—even yet," she murmured, with an almost reproachful glance up at the round moon. "It is not so *very* late. And he said I might expect him about—"

The sentence was not ended in words. A short, uncertain gasp broke from her lips as she leaned further forward, her little hands tightly clasped, her brown eyes sparkling, her breath coming quick and fast.

Far away below she could just distinguish a shadowy, uncertain shape, which intuition, rather than keenness of vision, told her was

that for which she waited and watched—was that of Glenn Elliston, her betrothed lover.

For a brief space longer the beautiful girl remained motionless under the spreading boughs, then she stepped swiftly forward, pausing on a ledge of rocks, clearly outlined in the moonlight as she waved a light shoulder-shawl in the air. Once, twice—then a low, glad cry greeted the answering motion that told her her eyes had not been deceived.

Light and sure-footed as a fawn, Lida sprang down the rocks and hastened to meet her lover. And even swifter moved Glenn Elliston, until they stood face to face under the moon.

"You had not given me up then, little one?"

"You said to-day," was the simple response, as she yielded to his gentle, yet ardent embrace.

"And there remains good two hours of grace, so I am not forsworn," laughed the young man, glancing up at the round moon.

"And—father?"

Timidly, almost fearfully, Lida looked into the frank, manly face of her lover as those words dropped from her lips. And as she saw how suddenly, how completely that smile vanished, her heart sunk heavy as lead in her bosom.

She shivered a little as Glenn passed one strong arm about her waist, drawing her closer to his side as he slowly moved along in the direction of the mountain home from whence she had come. Her head drooped and tears dimmed her eyes, for already she knew that there was no glad tidings in store for her on that score.

"He has been held for trial, Lida," gently muttered Glenn, yet striving to infuse encouragement into his voice and manner. "That is little more than was to be expected, you know. It simply means that he has enemies who have tried to throw suspicion upon him, and that those who know him less perfectly than you and I and his friends here, ask for a little more light on the subject before setting him free."

"They will murder him!"

"They will set him free, more loved and honored than before, you mean, little one," quickly uttered Glenn, with a laugh that sounded forced and unnatural, despite his efforts to the contrary. "He is innocent of the foul deed which some idiot of a detective has tried to fasten upon him. They would not dare to find him guilty, for—"

"Others have suffered unjustly. There is no law for any save the rich—and father is poor!" bitterly murmured the girl, her voice broken by unshed tears.

"There is law—the law of friendship and true hearts. If all else fails, Lida, be sure that law will not. Owen Tredgold is innocent, and I swear he shall never suffer the penalty due another's crime! And not I alone: at a word every man on the range will take saddle to set the man all love and honor at liberty. If all else fails, that hope still remains, little one."

Very strong and manly and earnest Glenn Elliston looked as he breathed these defiant words, and Lida felt a degree of comfort as she gazed and listened. She never paused to reflect that this was but one man, and he only a mortal. That it was the law of a great and prosperous State which he so coolly proposed to override.

He better realized the nature of the contract he was thus assuming, but his first object was to banish the haunting fears which had taken possession of the maiden, and he cared little what means he employed just then.

Together they passed up the slope and toward the little house where the Tredgolds lived, young Elliston asking after the welfare of Mrs. Tredgold, whose illness had kept Lida from going to Greenville at the same time as her father, the sooner to learn his fate, as well as to comfort him the best she might.

"Mother is better," was the steadier response, as they caught sight of the red light shining through the open door and uncurtained window. "She is still weak, but if father was—was here, she would soon be as well as ever. She is so anxious—"

"And is she—still as hard on me, pet?" softly uttered Glenn, hesitating just a trifle over the choice of a word to express his meaning. "Does she still talk to you about Bion Barnave?"

"Still the same," was the barely audible response. "I wish I could say different. I wish she could learn to see through my eyes."

"Then mother and daughter would be rivals, and Owen Tredgold would be tempted to go gunning for yours truly. No, no, Lida," with a low, happy laugh. "Not with your eyes, pet; I want but one woman to look at me thus—but with a little more favor, say. And a little less favor on that smooth-tongued, black-hearted Bion Barnave!"

The last sentence came harsh and bitterly, though uttered almost beneath his breath. Lida shivered just a trifle, but she made no reply. They were almost at the house, and as a dog barked sharply, the tall, thin figure of a woman appeared in the open doorway.

This was Martha Tredgold, Lida's mother, and the fears of Glenn Elliston that his appearance would be anything but welcome, were not so far from the mark. Cold, grave, reserved, Mrs. Tredgold received him, but hardly asked him a question as he briefly related the results of his trip to the county seat.

"I saw him after his committal," added El-

liston, "and he asked me to convey his love to you both. To say that he was still of good cheer, and confident of coming out all right in the end. He trusted that you would not worry on his account, but make haste to get well and hearty again."

"The end!" exclaimed Mrs. Tredgold, with sudden bitterness. "There is but one end, and one ending! I foresaw it from the first! A rope and a gallows—there's the end! And for what? Killing a bloodhound? Cutting short the life of a villain who fattened on other men's misery? Not a bit of it!" with a harsh, forced laugh that was almost hysterical. "Hung for being a poor man! Throttled like a sheep-killing cur for owning only inches where others own acres! Murdered in the name of the law because he was honest, and true, and—my husband!"

Her voice broke down, and she bowed her head in her hands as they rested on the little table. Glenn Elliston started toward her, but paused in obedience to a quick gesture from Lida. She shook her head, then moved noiselessly toward the door.

Silently he imitated her action, bending his head to receive her guarded whisper:

"Go, if you love me! All you could say would only make matters worse while this fit is upon her. Go—and wait until I come!"

A swift glance showed him Mrs. Tredgold still with her face hidden on her hands, and Glenn Elliston dropped a kiss softly on the brow of the maiden whom he loved, even as she loved him in return. Then, with a longing look, he crossed the threshold and moved away.

He paused when in a measure covered by the shadows cast by the trees, watching the open doorway for the coming of his love. And as he watched, his thoughts roved swiftly back to the beginning of this sore trouble.

That was before his return to the neighborhood, where his boyish days had been passed until he was sent to a Northern college to complete his education.

When the war between the States broke out, Glenn Elliston was not one to hold back. Though a native of South Carolina, his ancestors were all of Northern stock, and his sympathies were naturally with the Union. He entered the army as a private. He fought as best he knew how, doing his duty with the thousands of other men who came out no higher in rank than they went in, yet no less worthy of praise and reward. And when the war came to an end, he was one of those true hearts who laid aside all feelings of bitterness, though not many had suffered more heavily than he.

His father and two brothers had died on the field of battle. His property was gone, swept away by the torch of war and of emancipation. He was left the last of his race, with hardly a dollar to his name.

He found the home property in the hands of a stranger, who showed papers that seemed correct enough, and which he was unable to disprove. His father had said nothing about selling the plantation, but that might have been done for all, since father and son had not met since the second year of the war.

He had no funds to enter into a legal fight, and so yielded to fate, retiring to the mountains where he found a small farm and its buildings, to which his right was undisputed. This proved to be all that was left of his one-time wealth, but Glenn Elliston was almost content. It was here that the greatest part of his boyhood had been passed, the mountain air seeming to suit his then weak lungs best. And it was here that he renewed his acquaintance with Owen Tredgold.

He could not remember Lida, at first. She had been but little more than a baby when he last saw her, himself a tall, manly lad. But soon the time came when he could honestly bless the fates that drove him to this mountain refuge; when he knew that he was among the richest of men, in being blest with the love of Lida Tredgold.

Owen Tredgold was another of those who had lost all but honor in that dread struggle. When it opened, he was comfortably rich, with many stout slaves, hundreds of fertile acres, a fine home, and everything a man could ask for here below. When it ended, he had nothing but his good horse and his sword, save his daughter and a prematurely broken-down wife.

Still he was not a man to repine openly. He managed to win back a little home on the mountain, and, like the majority of his neighbors, tried to eke out a scanty living by turning his corn crop into more salable whisky. He was a plain, rough, almost illiterate man. He knew that this "moonshining," was said to be illegal, but he could not be brought to see just why it should be so deemed.

His forefathers made all the whisky they cared to use or sell, and made it openly and above-board. No one bade them cease. No one came to collect a tax or tried to destroy his still. If this was the case, only a dozen or a score of years ago, why should it be different now? If it was right and proper then, what made it sinful now?

The markets were too far away, and the roads too bad for him to haul his corn at anything

like a living profit. He could put up a cheap still, turn his crop into whisky, his whisky into ready money; and without some money, no man can live long. Through whisky alone could a mountaineer get money. And therefore he had a right above all so-called law to manufacture whisky.

After this fashion Owen Tredgold reasoned, just as his fellow denizens of the mountains reason to this day; what was right in the father could not be wrong in the son.

The authorities said different, and the spies of the Secret Service came into the mountains, hunting for violators of the law. These were followed by armed *posses*, and blood began to flow. Secret stills were ferreted out, destroyed, and their owners carried off to captivity. And there was hard, desperate fighting on occasions, when the sturdy mountaineers resisted arrest, or sought to rescue their captive fellows.

One day the corpse of a revenue officer was found lodged on a shallow of the roaring, tumbling river. There was a bullet hole over his heart. And word was spread all over the land that Pendy Rowell had been murdered by the moonshiners.

That was nearly five years before this moonlight night, and long ago the tragedy was forgotten in more recent events of interest. Then, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, came word that a party of well-armed men had arrested Owen Tredgold and carried him off to the county seat, on suspicion of being the murderer of Pendy Rowell.

The excitement was intense among the mountaineers, for not one of all their number was more respected, more loved, than Owen Tredgold. He was almost like a king to them, though his reign was of love rather than force.

The arrest was so adroitly managed that before word got abroad, the mountaineer was safely caged in Greenville. Even then, only for the cooler, wiser advice of John Mahar and other true friends of the imprisoned man, a rescue would have been attempted at the muzzle of their rifles. Instead, a messenger was sent to town to learn the exact facts, as nearly as possible.

That messenger was Bion Barnave, but before he was sent, Glenn Elliston was already at the county seat, doing all he could for the father of the maiden he loved so dearly.

That was little. The evidence on which the arrest was made, was not permitted to leak out. The preliminary examination was had in private, and all that the world at large could learn was that cause was found for holding Owen Tredgold for trial as the murderer of Pendy Rowell.

Glenn Elliston learned but little more. He managed to obtain a brief interview with the prisoner, who told him a written charge of murder had been entered against him. Who wrote it, what his name, was as yet kept a secret.

Thoughts something like these were flitting through the brain of the young man as he waited for the coming of his love. That was not long delayed. Light as a fairy she stole out of doors and as though guided by intuition came direct to where he was in waiting.

"I cannot stay long, dear," she uttered, hastily, as she yielded to his warm embrace. "Mother is poorly—you saw that. Just now she has forgotten me, you—everything save our wretchedness—but it will not last for long. Then she will miss me, and know I have come to you."

"I am selfish to keep you even a minute, but how can I help it, little one?" murmured the lover, bending closer to read her face. "It has been over a week since I saw you! And that is an age!"

"If so long to you, what must it have been to me, Glenn?" murmured Lida, her words barely intelligible, her voice trembling and choked. "At least, you had work to do—work to keep you from thinking—thinking until it seemed as though one's poor brain must go wild! Only a week? It seemed years—ages! I feel like an old woman!"

Though so deeply in love, Glenn Elliston was no fool. He saw how bitterly in earnest the girl was, and no thought of idle compliment came into his mind. Gently he bowed and touched her brow with his bearded lips. Tenderly, protectingly he drew her trembling figure still closer to him.

"I know—I can guess, little one. Though I had work to do, I had time to give a thought to your misery here. I knew you were suffering torments of uncertainty, and for that reason I left town sooner than I would have done otherwise. I wanted to find out who it was charged your father with that horrible, unjust deed, but I dared wait no longer. And your father hurried me back. He bade me tell you—"

A sound from the house arrested the young man, and he glanced quickly in that direction. Quickly, impatiently, Lida exclaimed:

"A message—for me? You did not mention that before!"

"Because it was to you, and not your mother. And then—you know she was hardly in fit condition to listen patiently or understandingly to to anything I might say, Lida."

"But from father—"

"If you think it best she should hear, you can tell her yourself, dear," was the grave response. "I was cautioned to mention it alone to you, until after we had carefully investigated the matter."

Lida was silenced if not convinced, though there was a longing, saddened look upon her pale face as her eyes turned toward the little cabin where the mother and wife was alone with her grief.

"A part of that message was that you were to trust me implicitly, little girl," added Elliston, softly, with a faint laugh. "I am proud of that, if of nothing else!"

"Because it is so wholly superfluous?" with a shy glance.

"Because it shows that one of your parents likes and believes in me, whatever the other—but let that pass: I forgot myself," he added, hastily, as Lida slightly shrunk from his encircling arm.

"Poor mother!" with a low sigh. "If you could know all she suffers—all she has suffered for years and years—you would be better able to make allowance for her, Glenn."

"I am not blaming or reproaching her, Lida," quickly, earnestly. "I have your love, his respect and liking; I can wait and try to gain her better will. It is not that; I grieved because I was debarred from lending my mite to cheer her up in this time of sore trial."

"I trust the day will come when she can know you as I know you. Until then, we must hope for the best. This message?"

"Is one I had not time to fully comprehend, but I have not forgotten anything he said to me for your ears. He said you would explain all obscure points. Our interview was far too brief for a full understanding."

"Tell me what he said, and I will do my best. Mother may call me at any moment, and then I will have to go."

"Your father told me he had been carefully reviewing the past, since his arrest, and that he could see but a faint glimmer of hope for him; the real criminal must be discovered."

"But how? After so many years!" cried Lida, her tones almost a wail as she listened to those words.

"He admitted that, but at the same time he declared that he could see no other chance of baffling those who have evidently determined on his ruin. He said that he could trust only in me, but that you would be able to aid me, if only in telling the story of the past."

"Of the—the finding of the body?" faltered Lida, with a little shiver as she cast a hurried, frightened glance around them.

"Of that discovery, and of the days that went before and came after," nodded the young man gravely, evidently collecting his thoughts and freshening his memory before speaking further.

"Your father said that no one in these parts seemed to even suspect that the man called Pendy Rowell was a revenue detective, until after the discovery of his corpse in the river. He said that he passed as a man from a lower city, out in search of his health; that he hunted and fished nearly every day; that he associated with the people as though one of themselves, showing none of the ear-marks of a detective or a spy."

"I remember something of this, and to have heard the folks wondering over the admirable manner in which he concealed his real business here," nodded Lida, thoughtfully.

"Your father said that, for the most part, this man stopped with Milton Sarsfield, down at the big house."

"He did. I have seen them riding together often," more positively uttered Lida, as though her memory was growing clearer as she thought.

"And your father said that, as he lived and drew the breath of life, he believed the man who killed Pendy Rowell was none other than this same Milton Sarsfield!"

Lida gave a start and a little cry. She pressed one hand to her brow, passing it back and forth as though trying to clear her brain. And even in the dim light there beneath the wide-spreading tree, Glenn Elliston could see that she was sorely puzzled.

"He—Milton Sarsfield—the assassin? How could that be possible when—but was it before—I am sure he had left the country before the body was discovered!"

"You are sure, Lida?" quickly uttered Elliston, his face paling. "Think—think how much it may mean to your poor father if this one frail hope deserts him forever!"

"It seems so—it seems certain, but—I may be mistaken," murmured the half-distracted girl. "Go on. Tell me why father thinks this Milton Sarsfield committed the deed. I will think—I will try to recollect."

"It is not at all a pleasant story for your ears, little one," softly uttered Elliston, his tones grave and gentle as he drew the powerfully-agitated girl still closer to his side. "But your father bade me speak frankly, openly to you. He bade me tell you that he could see no other hope for his defeating his enemies, should this chance fail him."

"Go on; I am listening."

"Your father said that after Pendy Rowell had lived with the Sarsfields for some time, their relations seemed to grow less pleasant. He said that once he came upon the two men quarreling violently about something, though when they saw him they both turned it off as though all sportive. At the time he was ready enough to believe this, especially since Pendy Rowell continued to stop at the big house."

"On another occasion he chanced to overhear Milton Sarsfield sharply reproaching his wife; just on what score he did not make out, though even then he suspected what he now feels was the truth. He is confident that Pendy Rowell tried to alienate the affections of Mrs. Sarsfield. He says that at the time it was common talk how very attentive the stranger was to the young and dashing wife of the planter, but until this black charge was brought against him, he never gave the matter more than a passing thought, knowing how apt country people are to imagine and talk scandal."

"He said that at or about the time Pendy Rowell disappeared, Milton Sarsfield and his wife left this part of the country, never to return; that he left so abruptly that it was only gradually the fact became known, even to those who had been most intimate with them. At the time he had thought it a little queer, but until he got to soberly thinking the matter over, carefully weighing every point, small or great, that could possibly bear on the mystery, he had never once connected that vanishment with the finding of the body of the detective."

"Now, he saw matters in a different light. Some one murdered the detective. He could think of no one else who had more reason to commit the deed than Milton Sarsfield. That reason was jealousy."

"It might have been—though so young, then, I can recall more than one speech that sorely puzzled me then," slowly murmured Lida.

"He said you would recall much that might be of service, when he bade me come to you and say this much. He said you would tell me all about the strange flitting of Milton Sarsfield, and much about the old darky left in sole charge at the big house. He meant Uncle Jax?"

"Ajax Telamon Sarsfield; yes," nodded Lida, with a faint smile.

"He had only time to say that he believed the negro could give us mighty important information if I could contrive to scare it out of the old fellow, but that this would be little better than a forlorn hope. He said the old fellow was true as steel to his master, and from what I have seen of him, I can readily believe that. Still—"

He broke off abruptly as a number of distant shots came echoing faintly to their ears, wafted on the favoring breeze. And following the shots came a murmur that might have been the sound of human voices in wild excitement or intense anger.

"Another raid!" Elliston ejaculated, with a start. "I heard rumors of some expedition while in town, but I never suspected it was meant for this part of the country!"

"Listen!" and Lida caught his arm. "That means death!"

CHAPTER III.

A MONKEY-HUNTING TURTLE.

"DURN a man 'at'll leave the sullar-door open right whar—eh?"

End over end the figure rolled, bringing up almost in the center of the little group that scattered instinctively before the human avalanche. Close to the fire, one rough-shod foot plowing through the glowing ashes as its owner, with a sudden effort, assumed a sitting posture, blinking around with a sorely bewildered demeanor.

"Camp-meetin' or a barbecue, an' the ole man's tumbled chuck-up an' slam-bang right into the middle o' the saremony! Camp-meetin' or—barbecue, an' I know it!" with a howl that might have been heard half a mile away as he jerked up his feet, slapping first one ankle and then the other to extinguish the glowing sparks of fire. "Barbecue—an' I'm the darned ole hog they're barberin', so I am now!"

Startled by the sudden and wholly unexpected appearance of this person, who doubtless had been spying upon them with evil intent, the mountaineers shrunk back, clutching their weapons in readiness for use the instant they could determine on the proper course to pursue.

Not for many moments did this hesitation last. Scarcely had the human catapult lifted himself to a sitting position, than Bion Barnave covered his ragged person with a revolver, something like an oath hissing through his tight-clinched teeth.

Nothing but the prompt action of John Mahar saved the intruder from almost certain death. With a strong, quick grasp he turned the leveled tube aside, hurriedly muttering:

"Not yet, lad! Wait an' see jest what-fer-sort o' critter he is!"

"A bloody spy—curse him!" grated the young man, his black eyes glowing vividly.

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no; looks to me more like a crazy loonytick."

"He's seen and heard everything that—"

"Flag o' truce, gents!" the stranger suddenly called out, holding up one dingy paw with a deprecatory motion, evidently just then beginning to realize that he had tumbled into danger. "I riz my gentle bazoo fer peace every time I'm 'lowed a vote; but ef it's got to be bloody war, jes' hol' on ontel the ole man kin git his battery onlimbered an' ready fer action. She'd orter be some's nigh about hyar; I kin take oath I hed her in my fist when my durned old huffs went back onto my copperossity an' bu'sted the meetin' wide open by— *I say!*" and a curiously mingled disgust and apprehension filled his dirty face as he shrunk back with a shiver from the weapons that covered him from a dozen points. "Tetch her lightly, gents! I ain't no bumb-proof waller in the bank, nur yit a targit-scurion on a free shoot fer all! I ain't a hog ef I do grunt an' war bustles. Flag o' truce, durn ye!"

The whine was rapidly changing into a growl of indignation, and the stranger seemed more in the humor for defying the leveled weapons than shrinking in trembling from them, though his hands were still elevated and empty.

"Who be ye, an' what fetches ye here?" sharply demanded John Mahar as he stepped in advance of his fellows, one hand motioning them to pause for a moment.

"Andy Turtle an' I'm out monkey-huntin'," was the prompt response, as the ragged fellow crossed his drawn-up feet and clasped his knees with his hands, his head cocked on one side as he glanced up at his questioner.

A dark flush crossed the stern face of the gaunt mountaineer, and the dangerous light deepened in his eyes as he sternly spoke:

"Monkeyin' won't sarve you this round, stranger, an' the straighter your tongue wobbles to order, the more likely you air to git off with a hull hide. Once more I ax ye what's your name an' business here?"

"Name, Andrew Turtle. Business, huntin' a man. Why I come, feet went back onto me. Why don't I git? Stop an' I'll count the reasons."

Prompt and soldier-like came the response. And more than one of those present fancied they could detect the old soldier in the rigid attitude the intruder assumed, though still sitting.

As the last crisp sentence passed his lips, Andrew Turtle began audibly counting each armed man before him, with such a business-like manner that John Mahar could not entirely refrain from smiling.

"Never mind countin'," he said, with a trace of sarcasm in his tones. "I don't reckon you need waste so much time; it's mighty long odds you done that over an' over while you lay hid up yender spyin' on us, fer—"

"Now it's *you* quit, critter!" sharply cried Andrew Turtle, flinging all soldierly dignity to the winds as he scrambled to his feet, one fist doubled and gyrating before the mountaineer's face. "I kin stan' it to be called a hog. I don't *hev* to kick when you blizzer away at my ole karkidge 'thout givin' me a show fer to 'turn the compliment. I kin choke down 'most anythin', from b'iled crow to sun-baked army mule. But I draw the line at *spy*, an' I draw it *d-e-e-p!*"

"Ef not spyin', what was you doin' up yender, then?"

"Lookin' fer a man," was the prompt response.

"An' you never knowed we was here ontel ye tuck a tumble right down into our middle, of course?" sneered John Mahar.

"Waal," with a faint grin, as one dingy paw slowly rubbed the bristling beard that covered his chin and almost all of his face. "I ain't sayin' quite that much. I did know you was here, sense the fire gave out a right smart light. An' in natur' I couldn't jest help takin' a look-ye-over, by way o' makin' sure the critter I wanted wasn't in the middlo' o' ye. But spyin'—draw the line right thar, stranger, an' draw it deep as the sile'll let ye! A soldier cain't play the spy, an' I've sarved, I hev!"

The ragamuffin drew his form proudly erect, his hands in position, his nose in the air, only his black eyes out of line as they turned askew to note the effect produced on the watchful mountaineers.

A faint smile came into the gaunt face of John Mahar.

"Fed or Confed?"

"A Johnny Reb from 'way back, now I tell ye!" was the prompt response, as the stranger once more dropped his stiff position, his dirty face lit up with a jolly smile, his dark eyes beaming brightly as they roved swiftly over his audience. "One o' the sort ye read about, too! None o' your stiff-backed an' rusty-hinged high-privates, I wasn't—no *sir!* A free an' independent rustler on the jump—that's *what!*"

"A bushwhacker!" ejaculated Mahar, his thin lips curling.

Like all who fought legally, he scorned those who made war as a free rover, no matter on which side they fought.

Andrew Turtle nodded his head vigorously, showing his teeth in a broad grin, as he made reply:

"Hit it fu'st clatter, boss! Bushwhacker,

griller, pawpaw melish, gray-back, butternut, ring-streaked an' brin'le; anythin' but *blue!* We left that color fer the faces an' feelin's o' folks that was smart enough to git out o' the way when we come by! You know how that was, I reckon? Then you ain't from old Mizzoury, nur yit Bleedin' Kansas!"

"One of Quantrell's men?"

"Part o' the time, yes. 'Nother part ridin' with George Todd. Or backin' up Bill Anderson. Then, ag'in, puttin' on the reg'lar gray an' makin' everythin' hum an' whistle with Gen'ral Jo Shelby. Gin'ral Price, too—Ole Pap Price, ye know. I was thar when he advanced by the rear an' fit with his heels, mule-fashion—*waal*, I was, honey!"

"An army boiled down an' poured into one suit of clothes," grimly interposed John Mahar, as the ex-guerrilla paused to catch breath. "I know your sort; I've run up ag'in 'em afore this. Heap oftener sense the war come to an end then while it lasted, though."

"That was your crooked luck, pardner, more'n your fault, I reckon," cheerfully uttered Andrew Turtle. "They couldn't everybody be in the thick o' the fight, an' somebody hed to watch over the camp fixin's, ye know."

John Mahar flushed hotly as he caught a faint ripple of laughter running through his ranks, and his heavy fist clinched tightly for a moment. But Andrew Turtle looked so innocent, so sympathizing, so entirely free from malice, that the impulse quickly died away.

His suspicions, too, were growing fainter than they were when that ragged figure came plunging down the steep bank, to land in their midst. Then he felt positive this must be a spy on their words, a cunning tool of the Revenue Service sharks, seeking to condemn them out of their own mouths. Now—he cast a quick glance around him, trying to read the belief of his fellows in their faces by the firelight.

He gave a little start as he saw that Bion Barnave was no longer with them, though he had heard no sound of his leaving. Could it be—

Even as the thought shaped itself in his mind, John Mahar caught sight of a dim, shadowy shape standing near a bush just without the circle of firelight, and as a hand was lifted beckoningly, he recognized the moonshiner spy.

He nodded his head quickly, and turned once more to Andrew Turtle.

"Part of the time I served on the provost-marshal's guard, but I didn't meet you then—sense you're here," he said, pointedly, then adding without giving Turtle a chance to interpose: "But that don't matter now. The war is over, an' a bushwhacker that come through with a neck no longer then natur' made it, is good as anybody else, long's he 'haves himself as he should. An' long's he don't stick his nose too mighty deep in business that don't consarn him, mind ye!"

"That's all right, pardner," was the prompt, business-like response. "I ain't blamin' ye so bad fer lookin' sorter cross-eyed at a feller who come in through the back door 'thout stoppin' to rap, like I did a bit ago. Ef I stood in your shoes I reckon I'd be jest as skittish. Fact is I've bin thar!"

"What do you mean by that?" sharply demanded Mahar, as the fellow nodded and winked, screwing up his face knowingly.

"Not a durned thing ef it goes ag'in' your grain, pardner. Let it drop an' say no more 'bout it."

"No doubt you'd like it, but that won't work. You was spyin' on us when you took a tumble, an'—"

"Ef you was a mount'in on two legs, still I'd say that's a lie!" bluntly, boldly interposed the stranger. "I was only lookin' fer a man, Monkey Dick Moss—mebbe you know him, somebody?"

He glanced quickly around the group, seeming to scan each face with intense earnestness as he uttered these words.

John Mahar caught a low, guarded sound, something like a whistle, and glancing toward Bion Barnave, saw that worthy again beckon to him, this time with increased earnestness. He nodded, then said:

"Ask the boys. I'll be back in a minnit. You'll be here when I come, I reckon? Mebbe I'll hev to ax you some more."

A slight nod to one of his men pointed these words, and then John Mahar turned aside to where the moonshiner spy awaited his coming.

"You wanted to see me, lad?"

"Back out of sight and hearing," muttered Barnave, his tones low and guarded, an echo of uneasiness running through them. "It may be too late, but no need to run any unnecessary risks."

"You mean that limber-tongued critter?" with a backward nod toward the fire where Andrew Turtle was standing.

"I mean that infernal revenue spy—yes!" grated Barnave, his strong teeth clicking, his dark eyes glowing like living coals of fire.

"You kin swar to that?" slowly demanded John Mahar, his brows contracting, his tones deep and stern. "You *know* the critter?"

Bion Barnave hesitated for an instant before replying:

"I know I have met the fellow before. I feel sure I saw him in town, and under a very different guise from this. Then he was clean and well dressed. Then he was—"

"Who with an' whar?" demanded Mahar, as the other hesitated, passing one hand across his brow as though to clear a puzzled brain.

"I'm trying to think," was the slow response. "I cain't place him exactly, but I'm dead sure he is other than what he pretends now! I'd almost stake my life on his being a spy!"

"Was that why you dodged out here?"

Bion Barnave nodded assent.

"Ef he's the spy you think, I don't reckon that'll save you, lad," with a short, ugly laugh. "Ef a spy, he hed time afore his tumble to spot each an' every face in the crowd."

"That may be so, but it was a chance worth taking. Not that I dodged altogether on my own account, mind you," Barnave added quickly. "But if I am to be of any real service to the cause in town, or to do anything for Owen Tredgold, I've got to keep shady, don't you see? Say this fellow is the spy I believe, and gets back to his employers to make his report—"

"They'll wait a mighty long time for that report, ef he is a spy," grimly muttered John Mahar, as he turned and strode back to the fire.

"You cain't tell nothin' 'bout the critter, kin you?" anxiously asked Andrew Turtle, turning to the gaunt mountaineer as he came back. "Monkey Dick Moss; a feller nigh-about my make an' build, but shriveled all up in the face like a frost-bitten monkey?"

"A fri'nd o' yours?"

"Fri'nd be durned!" snorted Turtle, with intense disgust in every tone and feature. "Jest sech a fri'nd as the devil is to holy water! Would I be huntin' him ef he was a fri'nd? would I be longin' fer his ha'r ef he was a fri'nd? Would I—look here, boss!" with sudden grave-ness, one dirty paw tapping the mountaineer on the arm as he added: "I want that critter, an' I want him mighty bad! I've follered him or his trail fer the last two years. I'll foller him ontel the crack o' doom, unless I run onto him afore then."

"You must want him mighty bad, then?"

"I do. So bad—look here, boss," and the dirty paw ceased its tapping and closed on Mahar's arm tightly. "Let me tell ye, then you'll see jest how it is your own self."

"When the war was done fit out, it was die dog or chaw the hatchet-han'le with me, don't ye see? I couldn't settle down whar I used afore the war. I'd bin too durned frequent, so to speak. They was them that hed it in fer me, red-hot an' still a-heatin', ye understand? Would 'a' jumped my claim too mighty quick *they* would!"

"Waal. I didn't come out o' the war with any too much richness. I wasn't one o' them durned nash'nal banks, ye want to understan'. I'd lost a heap, but nothin' that was wuth a pension, even ef I'd fit on the pension side o' the game, which I hedn't—no *sir!*"

"Waal. I hed to live. So I sorter swarmed over into ole Kaintuck an' settled down to make a honest livin'. Got a worm an' set it to eatin' up corn to turn out mountain-dew. Never once thought o' gittin' into trouble, mind ye, I didn't! Why fer should I think it? Ef I bought or riz the corn, wasn't it mine? Couldn't I use or waste it 'cordin' to my own likin'? Ef I could turn it into pork, why couldn't I turn it into whisky ef the notion tuck me? We used to do it long afore the war, an' why should anybody kick at our doin' of the same thing now?"

"Waal. They *did* kick. Kicked the hull durned business endways. Kicked me into court, an' kicked me from court into jail—durned ef they didn't, now!" and Andrew Turtle gazed about him with a deeply injured expression upon his dirt-grimed face like one confident of receiving a full measure of sympathy.

Instead, not a word was spoken. Not a smile of friendship or sympathy was given him. Stern and silent stood the mountaineers, warily on their guard, waiting for their leader to give them their cue.

The injured expression gradually gave place to one of reproach as Andrew Turtle vainly looked for condolence. His grasp relaxed, his hand moving from the arm of John Mahar, slowly dropped with its mate behind his back, where the dirty fingers intertwined as though their owner would thus restrain them from soliciting the sympathy which had thus far been denied him. And as Andrew Turtle resumed, his voice was clearer, harder, more like that of a man who depends wholly upon himself.

"Waal. What did I do? Sarved my time out like a little man; but that was jest beca'se I couldn't well help myself, mind ye! I wasn't clean convarted. Let 'em talk an' preach an' sarmonize all they liked. I couldn't see why a man hedn't the right an' liberty to do what he pleased with the things his own money hed bought, jest so he didn't step too mighty hefty on his neighbors' toes. An' so, it wasn't long afore I hed another still at work."

"Not free an' open like the other was, mind ye! That fur the revenue sharks hed convarted me. I didn't like the sort o' board they furnished, an' so I hid my doin's the best I knowed how. An' that was a best that lasted fer years."

A best that would still be best, on'y fer that durned Monkey Dick Moss!

"He sold me out, an' the revenue sharks made a clean sweep of the hull business, 'cludin' me! An' when they got me up afore the squire, they socked it to the ole man powerful, now I tell ye! Didn't pay no 'spect to his bent back or gray hairs, they didn't! Jest piled on the years, an' balanced it on the other side with a fine hefty enough fer to hold the ole man level under the load!

"That's what they thought, mind ye. What I thought—waal, that was a mighty sight different. Mostly of Monkey Dick Moss. Bold as brass an' twicet as soundin', he give in the evidence that wound the ole man up tight in the cobwebs o' the law. Never stopped at a lie or two. Mebbe he see that they was p'izen in the ole man's eyes. Mebbe he reckoned he'd live longer of the old man was to rot in jail. Mebbe he was mighty nigh right, too!

"Waal. I didn't sarve my hull time out. I got away. Never mind jest how, nur who may hev lent the ole man a holpin' han'. Never mind ef it was a clean steal, or ef they was a snag in the way that hed to be rooted out afore the job was jobbed. Ef a man ain't ready to take sech chances as comes in the way o' business, then he wants to keep out o' business. I tuck mine, an' I got out. But I hed to lay mighty low fer a time, an' afore I could move with a free foot, Monkey Dick Moss tuck warnin' an' pulled out lively!

"From that day to this I've hunted him high an' low. One time I'd be nigh enough to shet-grip on his shadder; then he'd turn up nigh a month's travel away, an' I'd hev to make a fresh start. It's lasted a heap o' while, a ready, but I'll git thar ef I keep on a-goin'! An' when I do git thar—waal, them as listens sharp enough 'll hear the sweetest music one man ever pumped out of another!"

In low, even, almost gentle tones came the closing sentence, but underneath lay a deadly resolve, an undying hatred, that almost dispelled the last lingering suspicions of the moonshiner chief. Surely, this could not be the idle romance of a spy, playing for his life. Surely this was bitter earnest.

While the echo of that voice lingered in his ears John Mahar reasoned thus, but the illusion did not last long. Past experience told him that the revenue service employed men who could make black seem white, give them only the ghost of a chance. And he recalled the firm assertion of Bion Barnave, that he had seen this same man in town, under an altogether different guise. If so, then he was surely a spy.

"A mighty hard story you've told, stranger," he said, slowly, his keen gaze fixed on the stranger. "So hard that I wonder you ain't shy 'bout pourin' it into the ears o' cl'ar strangers to ye. What ef we was to send word o' your wharabouts to the jail you run from?"

Andrew Turtle gave a chuckling laugh as he replied:

"I ain't quite as big a fool as I look, pardner. I didn't hear so mighty much up yender, but that little was plenty 'nough to make me dead sure you wasn't the sort to give a man away like that."

"Then you admit spyin' on us?" sharply cried Mahar, frowning.

"No, I don't, nuther," was the quick response. "I 'mit ketchin' a glimp' o' your firelight as I passed, 'long back yender, lookin' fer a snug place to bunk, ef so be I couldn't hit a shanty with a bite and a sup into it. I 'mit reasonin' thet whar they's a light they's a fire, an' whar's the fire they must be somebody fer to tetch it off; an' whar they's a human critter they's mighty apt fer to be somethin' to drink, even ef they ain't no kiver nur no grub."

"Waal, I come over this way to see how nigh my guess hit the mark, but it hit it too mighty hard, 'peared like at fu'st squint. Looked like war-time over ag'in, so many men with thar tools, ye see, an' never a petticut nur any other non-combatant in the ranks. Made me think o' the days when we used to lay in the bush an' poke fun at the blues."

"And still you wasn't playin' the spy?"

"Not spyin' to say spy," promptly. "Jest makin' out your colors, so to speak. An' when I oncet see the curled worm an' the corn an—"

"You joined us. Do you always come down a hill that way?"

"Every time—when I can't help myself," grinned Turtle. "Fu'st I knowed I didn't sca'cely know nothin'! Durn a root that cain't hold up the weight of a little runt like me, anyway!"

"When was you at the county seat last?" sharply demanded Mahar, bending forward to keenly scan the face of the suspected spy.

"The which?" innocently asked Turtle, his black eyes opening wide, meeting that suspicious gaze blandly, unflinchingly.

"At Greenville. You was thar last week," frowned Mahar.

"Oh! that's what ye mean, is it? I was thar, sure enough, but how you come to guess it gits me! I never fergit a face, ef it's han'some, an' I kin take my davy I never met you thar!"

"You are 'quainted in town?"

"Ef anybody littler'a you war to say so, I'd

tell 'em they lied!" grinned Turtle, with a wink. "Es it is, you're 'way off. Don't know a livin' soul in the burg. Never was thar afore, nur don't expect to be thar ag'in. Don't like the customs fer a cent! Two hours in town, an' got yanked up afore the squire an' fined fer drunk an' disorderly—an' me with a breath sweeter then that of a nussin' baby, and quieter then a sleepin' lamb! Durn sech a town, anyway!"

"You was see'd in town," slowly, sternly uttered John Mahar, emphasizing each sentence with a light tap of one bony finger on the shoulder of the stranger. "You was well dressed. You was actin' your own self then, while now you're playin' a part. What makes the big change?"

Andrew Turtle gazed at the speaker fixedly, his eyes opening wider and wider, his lower jaw drooping until the ruddy light fairly illumined the red cavity back of his white teeth. And as John Mahar ceased speaking, the suspected spy closed his jaws with a click, driving the pent-up breath through his dilating nostrils with a whistling sound..

"Waal. Now I will be durned!" he ejaculated, shaking his shaggy head slowly back and forth as he stared into that hard, stern face. "An' yit you don't look like you was jokin', nuther!"

"You'll find it a mighty rough old joke, stranger, ef you turn out to be a spy, as everythin' goes to prove," sharply retorted Mahar, his strong hand closing tightly on the other's shoulder. "You must 'a' heard enough up yender to know that we're in a box whar we cain't afford to throw away a single chance. You must 'a' heard enough to make it fool work to let you go with a loose tongue, at least until we've proved for dead sart'in that you're jest what you claim to be, an' not a spy huntin' down honest men."

Andrew Turtle drew his stooping frame erect, his eyes beginning to sparkle, his face flushing visibly through its coating of grime. And when he spoke his voice rung out sharply, almost menacingly:

"Fer the last time I say I ain't no spy, an' the man—"

"Try his beard, Mahar!" cried Bion Barnave, in a disguised voice, though not venturing from the covert he had sought as soon as he had time to collect his thoughts after the sudden appearance of this suspicious stranger. "If it is false—Ha!"

John Mahar acted promptly on the hint, and with a swift grasp that Andrew Turtle could not wholly evade, he caught his fingers in the bristling beard, to find it come loose from the face of the other!

A cry of angry amazement rose to his lips, but it was checked by a heavy blow from a tightly-clinched fist that sent him reeling back upon his men, while the unmasked spy leaped swiftly into the darkness.

"Take him—dead or alive!" grated Bion Barnave, his pistol exploding as he leaped forward in swift pursuit.

CHAPTER IV.

"AJAX, DEFEYING THE LIGHTNING."

FOR a moment the moonshiners were cast into utter confusion by this sudden change of affairs. Hardly one among them had understood the full purport of the words uttered by Bion Barnave before John Mahar stripped the hairy disguise from the face of the man calling himself Andrew Turtle. Not one was prepared for the swift stroke that sent the gaunt mountaineer reeling back into their midst, and before a hand could be lifted to prevent him, the spy, if spy he was, had cleared the circle of firelight, leaping into the bushes and dashing away at break-neck speed.

Only when Bion Barnave sent a shot whistling after the fugitive, following it with others as he sprung forward in pursuit, shouting fiercely for them to take the cunning rascal, dead or alive, did they spring into life and action.

A volley of pistol and rifle shots were sent tearing through the shrubbery in the direction taken by the fugitive, and each man of the group hastened in chase, their angry voices blending in a savage growl for blood—for revenge on the one who had so completely tricked them.

"Hold your fire! Run him down alive!" cried John Mahar, in a white rage as he joined in the blind chase, yet clear-witted enough to know that bullets in the dark might easily prove more dangerous than profitable to their own party.

Through the bushes, over rocks and stray boulders, tripping and stumbling, blinded by the abrupt transition from firelight to obscurity beyond its limits, the moonshiners ranged, now pausing for an instant in hopes of catching some sound to guide them, straining their eyes after a glimpse of their enemy.

Little by little the gloom seemed to grow less intense. They could see further and with a little more distinctness, though even now it was but little better than guess-work with the most owl's among them all.

That was John Mahar himself, whose long legs had quickly carried him up to and past even Bion Barnave.

He paused abruptly, stooping low and sweeping his eyes along the tolerably open space before him, hoping to catch a glimpse of the fugitive. One instant—then a fierce growl broke through his tight-clinched lips as he plunged forward at redoubled speed, every nerve and every muscle set for the struggle.

There was a crashing among the bushes, a heavy fall, and then the voice of the gaunt moonshiner rung out viciously:

"Now I hev got ye! Cave, or out goes yer light fer good!"

Bion Barnave sent up a yell of fierce delight as he shouted:

"Close in around them, lads! Riddle the spy if he tries to break away! Dead or alive, remember!"

"I've got him, don't you fear!" grimly panted John Mahar as, half-falling, half-springing out of the bushes into the moonlight he brought his captive with him. "When I once git my—The devil!"

He staggered back like one dealt a severe blow, releasing his savage grip, permitting his captive to drop in a limp heap to the ground. And from that limp, quivering heap came the quivering words:

"Fo' de good Lawd! Don'—don' kill a po' niggah, boss!"

Bion Barnave sprung forward, bared blade in hand, grasping the prostrate form as though he doubted the evidence of his senses.

"Who the foul fiend—*you*, Uncle Jax!"

"What dey is lef' ob me, boss! What dey is—*ugh!*" with an explosive grunt as the infuriated young man hurled him aside with an oath that testified to his intense disappointment and rage.

"Not our game, men!" Barnave cried, springing to his feet and glaring savagely around. "Scatter and take him in! Dead or alive!"

"No use—it's only a waste o' time an' trouble," coldly uttered John Mahar, suddenly regaining all his customary coolness. "The critter's gone—give us the slip from the fu'st jump—turned into a durn, no-count nigger!"

"Deed an' double 'deed I wasn't doin' nuffin', boss!" whimpered the darky, seemingly nearly frightened out of his wits, crouching and cowering in the moonlight, glancing fearfully from one armed hand to another, shivering until his teeth clicked audibly together.

Bion Barnave stooped and struck him across the lips with his open hand, grating savagely:

"Hold your hush, or I'll gag you with a knife through your lungs!"

"Stooping, he bent his head, holding his breath in acute listening, a gesture of his other hand telling the moonshiners to do the same.

Moment after moment. Straining every nerve to sharpen the one sense of hearing, hoping thus to regain the lost clew. But all in vain.

Only the usual night sounds were audible. Not a footstep, not a rustle of leaf or crackling of twig to tell of a fugitive.

"Scatter out and beat the glen, anyhow!" grated Barnave, who seemed particularly uneasy over the escape of the spy. "The cunning devil can't have got clean away! He *must* be laying low, thinking to slip off when we're off our guard. Find him—we've got to find him!"

Off he tore, but John Mahar slowly shook his head as he stood with folded arms watching the scattering. Not that he felt less disappointment than his fellows, or realized their peril in a slighter degree; but some instinct told him the spy had escaped them beyond capture.

"Fends on how long he was thar, an' how much he hearn us say," he muttered, barely above his breath. "Ef it was only the talk 'bout Owen Tredgold, it don't matter much. But ef he hearn all that went afore—ef he—*You dark!*"

The negro was trying to steal silently away from his captor, but as John Mahar wheeled with that sharp warning, Uncle Jax cringed and cowered, mumbling huskily:

"'Deed I ain't tryin' to do nuffin' boss! Cross my heart ef—"

"It'll need more'n one cross to save it whole, ef you cain't read your title mighty cl'ar, Lemon Sarse!" sternly muttered the moonshiner.

"What fetched ye here, an' how come it, you black imp?" with abrupt fierceness as a fresh suspicion struck him: "You was in cahoots with that dirty spy! You an' him was playin' the same game!"

The gaunt moonshiner stooped and caught the trembling negro by the shoulder, lifting him to his feet, holding him before him where the full light of the moon fell athwart his face, shaking him savagely as the poor fellow stammered out a trembling denial.

"Hold your hush an' let me look at ye. Let me see the two eyes o' ye, dark! So—stiddy, ef ye know what's best fer the good o' ye!"

A poor, trembling, terrified creature seemed Uncle Jax, though he tried his best to obey, to meet that fiery stare without flinching. And he succeeded better than John Mahar expected, too.

Almost as tall as the gaunt mountaineer, but of slighter build and shoulders that were bent by age and trials. Clad in garments that were of better shape and finer material than those usually worn by his class, with white shirt, collar and

old-fashioned stock; with coat of ancient cut but careful keeping; with patchless trousers and whole shoes; with frosty head bare, but with an antique, bell-crowned beaver hat fast in his trembling hands.

This was Ajax Telamon Sarsfield: "Uncle Jax" on ordinary occasions; "Lemon Sarse" on the tongues of the angry or irreverent.

This keen scrutiny did not last long. It had hardly begun, when his keen ears told John Mahar that the search for the spy had failed, and that his fellows were returning empty-handed.

"The wuss fer you, Lemon Sarse, unless you kin c'lar yourself!" the mountaineer grated, releasing his grip and permitting his captive to fall back a pace or two.

"Deed I hain't done nuffin', boss. I was des—des—"

"The white devil's gone, but we can get the truth out of his black imp, I reckon!" cried Bion Barnave, hurrying up to the spot. "It's only a nigger, to be sure, but we'll get as near even as we can."

John Mahar stepped between the angry young man and the negro, his hot brain cooling rapidly as he saw how savagely vindictive the spy appeared.

"It's only Uncle Jax, lad, an' they ain't much harm into him, I don't reckon. He says he jest happened by—"

"Lookin' fo' what I done los', boss—lookin' fo' my rabbit-foot, what I done los' somewhar dis yer way come yist'day, sometime. 'Deed an' double 'deed twice ober, boss, I nebber meant to hurt," quavered Uncle Jax, but with a show of returning courage, now that one man at least showed an indication of friendliness.

"With a lightnin'-bug fer a lantern, wasn't ye, Uncle Jax?" laughed Mahar, with grim mirth.

"What better light could he ask than our fire, up yonder?" grated Bion Barnave, with a short, fierce toss of his head up the glen. "Ask what fetched him this far from home, so late at night. Make him tell—"

"I done tole it, boss," muttered the negro, his tones growing more steady. "I was huntin' what I los'—"

"Keerful, Uncle Jax!" warningly muttered Mahar, frowning anew. "It ain't no sech truck as that we're in need of. Folks don't go huntin' lost things when it's night, without takin' some sort o' light with 'em. Nur you ain't the critter to go fer to traipse the hills an' hollers so nigh cock-crow all by your lonesome self; spooks an' bogies too mighty plenty, Uncle Jax!"

"Thar—right ahind the nigger! Jump, Lemon Sarse!" sharply cried one of the moonshiners, with admirable acting.

Jump the poor darky did, with an agility that belied his white wool and bent frame. Jump, with a wailing cry that sounded more spook-like than human. And only a deft trip by the foot of Bion Barnave kept him from breaking away in headlong flight.

"Enough tomfoolery!" the spy grated, angrily, as the moonshiners roared with clumsy mirth. "Little more and the coon would have given us the slip just as the other devil did! Hopple him, some of you. I'm too mighty hot to trust my grip onto him!"

The laughter ceased almost as soon as it began for in sober truth this effort of the negro seemed far more like an attempt to escape their clutches than a spasmodic display of fright. And several of the band pounced upon Uncle Jax, binding his hands behind him, paying no attention to his panting, broken appeals for mercy.

John Mahar stood frowning, one hand pushing the tip of his heavy beard between his nipping teeth. His first suspicions were steadily growing weaker, and already his conscience was beginning to prick him a little for this rough treatment of one who, despite his color, was generally liked, if not respected, throughout that region.

Surely there was no harm in the old negro? And yet—what had brought him so far from home at that late hour? Uncle Jax, the most superstitious of all his superstitious race? Uncle Jax, who firmly believed that the spirit world held high revel throughout the midnight watches; who devoutly believed in charms and spells and incantations; who wore "the rabbit-foot" night and day; who held "Cunjur King Saul," the mighty "hoodoo man," as but little lower than the angels?

And why had he been spying about their meeting place? Why had he taken to flight so hurriedly, unless he felt guilty?

"Don't be too mighty rough, mates," said Mahar, frowning as he caught the moaning voice of the negro through the scuffle. "He's only a nigger, but he's old—old an' harmless as—"

"Harmless as a snake!" interjected Bion Barnave, surlily. "Not too harmless to play the spy on us, is he? Not too harmless to play in with that infernal bloodhound—the blackest, bitterest enemy men of our sort ever had!"

"You said you couldn't place him, lad!" ejaculated Mahar.

"Nor could I, then, thanks to his disguise, but when you tore away his false beard, I caught a fair glimpse of his face, and I knew him that instant. So do you know him, or I'm 'way off my base," with a short, harsh laugh. "Curly Rooks, the Secret Service spy!"

For a single breath there was silence profound. The moonshiners interchanged glances, swift and wild-eyed. Then the silence was broken.

Not with oaths and curses, but with a low, growling sound that was tenfold as impressive; a sound that might have come from a den of famishing wild beasts, just waking to scent their coveted prey.

Bion Barnave was right; they did know this bloodhound of the revenue service, though as yet only through the deadly reputation he had gained by his successful exploits in neighboring States. If he was here, and in disguise, then there was danger of no ordinary sort to be guarded against.

"You ain't talkin' scatter-fashion, lad?" slowly asked Mahar, his bronzed face growing pale, his lips compressing rigidly. "I heard it whispered that he was at the bottom of the movement to solve the mystery which had so long hung over the death of Pendy Rowell; and I heard on good authority that Curly Rooks and Pendy Rowell used to hunt in couples—were side-partners of the closest sort."

The pallor began to fade from the face of the gaunt moonshiner, and there was a trace of eagerness in his voice as he spoke again:

"Then it ain't us he's lookin' fer, after all! Ef it's only the man that wiped out the detective, good luck go with him, say I! Ef he's nigh as smart as they make him out, Owen Tredgold 'll go free to leave a place fer the real murderer!"

Bion Barnave laughed again, almost sneeringly.

"Do you think Curly Rooks would fling a chance to make a whisky-haul over his shoulder just because he happened to be looking for something else? Don't think it, neighbor! If he saw a dozen heads to hit, he'd find fists for them all. Ten to one he's at the bottom of this fresh movement in this region. A hundred to one that we'll hear from his heelers before this moon grows old!"

John Mahar laughed shortly, his voice hard and grim.

"Mebbe he'll break his record this trip. Smart as he is, he won't find a blazed trail to—"

A swift, impatient gesture cut his speech short. Bion Barnave made it, casting a side-glance toward the old negro, now standing erect with a guard on each side, his hands bound firmly behind his back.

"What if he has help from the inside?"

"You mean that Uncle Jax—I don't think it, lad!"

"'Deed I nebber done nuffin', boss!" muttered the negro, quailing a little as the moonshiner spy turned upon him with an angry gesture.

"Stuff his jaws if he yelps again without asking, men!" harshly cried the young man, frowning blackly. "And you, neighbor," turning to the gaunt mountaineer, his tones growing softer, "take a little look backward. Where did Pendy Rowell use most when he was here? At the Big House, with Milton Sarsfield. They were thick as peas in a pod; too thick not to be tarred with the same stick."

"But the nigger—"

"Was Sarsfield's body-servant, and his shadow wherever he went as long as his master lived here. What the master knew, the servant must have known as well. As a proof how thoroughly he was trusted, see how Sarsfield left him in complete charge of the property, with power to sell and buy, to rent or run, without any one to question or keep a check upon him."

"We all know that much," muttered Mahar, impatiently.

"And think I'm wasting time and breath in recalling it? Maybe not, neighbor, if it helps to show you why I'm ready to swear that the old black rascal is playing into the hands of the bitterest, most dangerous enemy men of our sort can have in this world. Pendy Rowell was a revenue detective, spying out the ground here. He lived with Sarsfield. Sarsfield had no secrets from Uncle Jax. And he knows every foot of ground in all this range—can point out every still and hiding-place between—"

"But he wouldn't do dat, boss—'deed he wouldn't, now!" eagerly interposed the captive, forgetting the threat made but a little before.

"You wouldn't?" cried Barnave, turning upon the negro, his voice quivering with rage and intense suspicion. "Then what were you doing here with that cursed bloodhound? Why were you spying on us in his company? Tell me that, will you?"

"Boss," slowly uttered the negro, his voice growing stronger, his gaze meeting that of the angry spy without flinching. "I wasn't with dat man-houn' you speak ob. I nebber knowed he was nigh ontwel he was clean gone. I nebber knowed dey was a man-houn' nur nuffin' ob de kin', untwel you say so."

"Then why did you run?"

"Wouldn't anybody run when de bullet come a-whizzin' an' a-zippin' roun' he years, whis'lin' out 'kill dat nigger! kill dat nigger?' An' a heap o' white men follerin' ob 'em up, cussin' an' a-nashin' ob dar teef? Ain't dat 'nough to make 'most anybody run, let 'lone a pore ole

nigger like Uncle Jax?" demanded the negro, with an injured air.

"Thar's somethin' in that, anyhow," muttered John Mahar, nodding his grizzled head. "I reckon it must 'a' bin a bit skeery, an' Uncle Jax ain't braver nor a lion, I reckon. tell the truth."

There was a slight inclination to laugh on the part of the moonshiners at this remark, for the cowardice of Ajax Telamon had passed into a sort of by-word in the hills, but Bion Barnave only frowned darkly as he spoke again:

"And that something is a lie, black as the rascal that gave it utterance! You may swallow it, but I can't and won't! I know the rascal was in company with that bloodhound. I know that he is playing to sell us out for a price to our bitterest enemies. And I'm going to have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth out of his head, or the Big House will lack an overseer when another sun rises!"

Uncle Jax shrunk back, shivering, but only for a moment. His courage seemed to grow with the emergency, and he faced Bion Barnave almost defiantly as he muttered:

"It ain't now like it used to was, Mr. Barnave. I'm black, but I'm a free man fer all dat! On'y a nigger, but you don't dast to kill me when I hain't done nuffin' to desarb it, no-how!"

Bion Barnave stepped forward until their faces almost touched, laughing hardly, sneeringly, as Uncle Jax shrunk back as far as the guarding hands on either shoulder would permit.

"Mighty bold words, Lemon Sarse, but they don't come from further back than your teeth. You know me. You know that what I dare say I dare carry out. And you know that when I swear I'll have the whole truth out of your hide, free man or not, I'll keep that oath!"

Then—just how it happened none present could explain with perfect clearness—the two guards were hurled aside, a bright blade flashed in the moonlight and severed the bonds of the negro, whose round head shot forward and struck Bion Barnave full in the face with a force that hurled him back against John Mahar, stunned and confused, his features one mask of blood.

"Run fer it, nigger!" screamed the shrill, high-pitched voice of Andrew Turtle, as he plunged like a human ram through the midst of the bewildered moonshiners, hurling them to the right and left, leaving a clear passage for Uncle Jax, who was nothing slack in improving the opportunity.

One instant—then the friendly bushes closed behind them both, before a single hand could be lifted to check their passage or fire a shot to stop them in death.

John Mahar shook himself clear of the half-stunned spy, and led the pursuit at break-neck speed, now thoroughly aroused. The moonshiners followed, their passions freshly heated by this second defeat.

"Kill him, ef you can't ketch him alive, but don't shoot the nigger!" panted John Mahar, as he pressed forward. "He's got to talk!"

The ground was more open, less obscured by trees and bushes than it had been during the first chase, and for several minutes occasional fleeting glances were caught of Andrew Turtle, or Curly Rooks, granting the belief of Bion Barnave was true.

Then, as soon as the nature of the ground would permit it, the white man gradually veered to one side, uttering a mocking yell as he did so, as though he wished to draw the main chase on his own track, the better to insure the escape of the old negro.

If this was really his intention, it seemed to work to admiration, for with hardl an exception the moonshiners pressed on at his heels, taking snap-shots whenever they sighted him long enough. But as he glanced back over his shoulder, Turtle saw that two or three men were hotly pursuing Uncle Jax, and knowing that he could do nothing more to serve the black, he bent his whole energy to saving his own neck.

And with such good success that before another mile was covered John Mahar drew up, panting, breathless, feeling that further search was worse than vain.

"He'll give us the slip, durn him!" he panted, with vicious spite, as his mates gathered around him. "Nothin' but a still-hunt kin bring him to taw, but I'll git him yit! I'll git him or he'll git me!"

"Lucky ef he don't git the bull caboodle!" gloomily muttered one of the moonshiners. "No common man could play with us like that, two times in the same night!"

"He's Curly Rooks."

Not another word was added to that crisp sentence; in pronouncing that name, John Mahar had said all that need be spoken.

Slowly at first, the baffled moonshiners retraced their steps until the valley was regained. They turned toward their homes, still in a group, and they were together when a faint call reached their ears.

"Hark!" exclaimed John Mahar, bending his

ear in listening. "That comes from nigh—Ha!" as the same sound was repeated. "The boys hev ketched one o' the two—most like the nigger!"

Such proved to be the fact, when John Mahar led his men up to the spot from whence that signal arose. And one of the captors proved to be none other than Bion Barnave, his bruised face swollen frightfully.

"None too soon, neighbors," he said, with an ugly snarl in his muffled tones. "Uncle Jax is going to confess, or run up a tree, sure!"

"You don't dast to do it, boss!" doggedly retorted the negro, his gaunt form drawn rigidly erect, defiance in every line. "I'm free an' a man, ef I be a nigger; an' the law'll cut you mighty deep ef you dar' do any sech bloody shame as dat!"

"Confess that you are playing in with Curly Rooks; tell us where he hides, and how we can get at him the shortest way; squeal from A to Izzard, or you'll see just what we dare do, you black rascal!"

"Clar to gracious I dunno nuffin' 'bout dat Curly Rooster!" earnestly affirmed the prisoner, but his voice was cut short by an angry roar from the crowd.

After all that had passed, this denial seemed to add insult to injury, and though a few of the cooler heads present feebly interposed, they were rudely repulsed by those who dragged the captive to the nearest tree, a slip noose fitted about his neck.

"First the rods, then the rope!" laughed the moonshiner spy ferociously through his bruised lips, as he flourished a long, lithe hickory sprout in his hand. "Well make you think the old-time days have come back again. Lemon Sarsel! When we get through, you'll forget that you ever called yourself a free man!"

"I is free—free an' a man!" grated Ajax, hoarsely, his eyes all aglow as he boldly met that burning gaze. "Flog me, an' I'll kill you!"

More than one who heard and saw him then, felt a little shiver not wholly unlike awe, but Bion Barnave was not of their number.

"Truss him up, neighbors!" he cried, with a savage whirl of the rod past that dark defiant face. "I'll take all the starch out of him in a holy minute, once my rod has fair play!"

"Stop right where you are, one and all!" came a clear, stern voice from the fringe of bushes a little to the rear. "I'll cripple the hand that dares to strike the first blow at Uncle Jax!"

Sharp and peremptory, that voice plainly meant business!

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE CHAMPION.

SIDE by side stood the lovers, listening intently, almost breathlessly, to the sounds borne on the faint night breeze. Faint, yet only too readily recognizable by both.

"It's a fight, sure enough," muttered Glenn Elliston, frowning darkly, as they both plainly distinguished pistol or rifle-shots. "It's a raid of some sort, and—Come, Lida, let me help you safe home, and then I'm off to—"

He took a step in the direction of the house, but the maiden checked him at the second. Her arms clung to him tightly, her face was pale as death, her voice broken and trembling as she uttered:

"No—you shall not—do not go, dear Glenn!"

"But if our friends are in trouble, Lida?"

"They are too far away for you to reach the spot in time to—Ha!" with a sudden start, and bending of her head in listening.

"It's over, one way or the other," muttered Elliston, drawing a long breath.

The sounds of firing no longer came to their ears, nor could they distinguish the peculiar murmur caused by the far-away human voices. Just then, though they knew it not, the moonshiners were bending every energy in the first mad rush for Andrew Tortle.

"Could you place it? Is it near any of the—the workings?" uttered Lida, lowering her tones and changing the latter part of her question with an unwonted degree of caution.

Glenn Elliston slowly shook his head, his brow wrinkled, an uneasy, perplexed light filling his eyes.

"It didn't last long enough for me to be positive, but it seemed—the echoes deceived me, I reckon."

"Then it deceived us both, Glenn, for the firing came from that direction," pointing to the east.

The frown vanished, and a smile came in its place.

"Then we were borrowing trouble without cause, little one, for there's naught over yonder worth making a fight for. And yet—I could have taken oath it was shooting—shooting and angry yelling!"

And so it had to the keen-eared girl, but she was too willing to drop the matter right there to say so just then. If there was trouble, let others settle it. Not Glenn—so soon.

"Try and forget it, dear," she murmured, softly, snuggling closer to the side of her lover. "If it was anything serious we'll hear it only too

soon. And I must be going in a minute; mother will miss me."

The matter was dismissed, if not forgotten, and the lovers returned to the subject which they had been discussing when the alarm cut them short.

Much was spoken that would be of no particular benefit to the story which is being placed before the reader, but other points were touched upon which are of importance enough to den and a passing mention.

Since his arrest for the death of Pendy Rowell, the revenue detective, Owen Tredgold had plainly done considerable thinking and reasoning. There had been a murder committed beyond all reasonable doubt. He stood charged with that crime, and unless the real criminal could be brought forward in time, he would almost certainly have to pay the dread penalty.

This peril served to sharpen his never-dull wits, and as he forced himself to slowly, deliberately go over the past, recalling every little incident of those days, he found more than one which startled him and almost forced his suspicions to gather about the Big House and its then occupants.

Pendy Rowell had been very intimate with the Sarsfields, living with them for weeks without a break. He was frequently seen riding, driving or walking with Mrs. Sarsfield. The neighbors began to whisper and smirk and nod knowingly when this fact was mentioned; they began to pity "poor, blind Milton Sarsfield!"

Hard feelings seemed to spring up between the two men, the rich planter and his guest. On one occasion at least they had almost come to blows—Owen Tredgold could take oath to that effect. Soon after, he had been a partial witness to a quarrel between Milton Sarsfield and his wife Bertha. He could not speak with positiveness, but it was his impression that he caught the name of Pendy Rowell, coupled with a hot threat or a curse, before Sarsfield broke off, detecting his approach.

At or about the time Pendy Rowell was last seen alive in the neighborhood, Milton Sarsfield abruptly left his place, saying farewell to none of his friends or neighbors, giving no warning of his flitting. He had never returned to the Big House. No letters had been received from him. All that was known of him came through Uncle Jax, whom he had left in charge of the place, with legal powers to carry it on as though every stick and stone, every rod and acre belonged to him alone.

"In furren parts, boss," Uncle Jax would bow, meekly. "Turrible hard name to say, an' de ole man ain't well l'arned in de dead langwidge, sah, no be ain't—'deedy!"

At first there was no little disturbance caused by this eccentric procedure on the part of Milton Sarsfield. True, it was his own property, and he had a legal right to use it as he liked. There were no slaves now, and in the eye of the law a negro was equal to a white man. Uncle Ajax was really far above the general run of his people; but—

The talk and gossip ended in a thorough investigation, which left Ajax Telamon master of the situation, outwardly meek enough, but still more independent and self-reliant in carrying out the trust placed in his hands by the master of the Big House.

So far as the keenest, most suspicious eyes could see, that trust was complete and unqualified. Uncle Jax had papers by virtue of which he could, if the temptation assailed him, sell every dollar's worth of property so suddenly abandoned by Milton Sarsfield, and convert the proceeds to his own use without fear of punishment.

What was the explanation of this truly remarkable trust?

"Milton Sarsfield killed Pendy Rowell, driven thereto by a mad jealousy. Uncle Jax had either seen or discovered the crime, and to silence him, his master gave him this power. And to lessen his own risk, in case the old man should let the truth escape, Milton Sarsfield fled the country. As Heaven hears me, I believe this to be the true explanation of the mystery."

So Owen Tredgold reasoned, in substance if not in words. So he told Glenn Elliston, and so in turn that young man told Lida Tredgold.

"He said, too, that his one hope lay in extracting the truth from the lips of Uncle Jax," added Glenn, thoughtfully. "He believed you could help me in this part of the work. He said Uncle Jax seemed very fond of you—and black-skinned though he is, I can readily believe all that!" was the very natural ending.

Lida yielded to his close embrace with a faint sigh of restful peace. She had suffered so much during the past days of gloom and fear and painful doubt. Her father taken away to answer for his life. Her mother broken down by this last heavy shock, too weak and nervous for the daughter to leave her side even to bear her father company in his trouble. To have to wait and watch, without word or hope, day after day. To be forced to remain idle, doing nothing—and that was the worst!

Little wonder, then, that she yielded, for the moment forgetting all else in that strong, loving

embrace. Little wonder that for the moment she felt a dreamy, languid peace and content.

But only for a moment. Again there came the sounds of firing and angry yelling, this time much more distinct than before.

Too clear and distinct for there to be any further mistake. There was trouble in the air, and instinctively they both felt that it nearly concerned them and theirs.

"You must go back to the house, Lida," hurriedly uttered the young man, moving in that direction. "Go in and close the house. Open to nobody, unless you recognize my voice. I must look into this affair."

"You must not—or with me!" firmly cried Lida, clinging to him the more tightly as he strove to put her away.

Glenn argued hurriedly, but without success. For once in her life the maiden refused to listen or to obey.

"Your life is not your own, now," she said, pale but resolute, as the wild sounds died away once more. "It belongs to father, until his good name is restored and his innocence of this foul charge made clear to all the world. If you will go—then I bear you company, to see that you do not risk that pledged life!"

What could he do? Not use force. He loved her far too entirely for that. And argument availed nothing. She would not enter the house without him. He could not tear her clinging arms away. And so—the alarm died away, and still the lovers stood beneath the wide-spreading tree.

Then—they caught the sounds of angry voices, of struggling men, of harsh threats and savage triumph.

For the third time Glenn Elliston tried to send Lida to the house so that he might investigate the matter, but for the third time he failed. Instead, she insisted on moving a little nearer the spot from whence the last alarm had risen. Insisted, and carried her point!

They heard the repeated signal that told John Mahar Bion Barnave had secured his prey. They crept a little nearer, until they could just detect the red light of the fire which the spy had his companions kindle beneath the tree where Uncle Jax was held captive. And there they crouched in breathless waiting until the main body of the moonshiners came up—until they distinguished the defiant voice of Ajax Telamon raised in answer to the savage threats of Bion Barnave.

"It is Uncle Jax!" panted Lida, her face pale as death but her large brown eyes all aglow. "They'll lynch him! And on his lips hangs the life of my father!"

"I'll save him, if you promise not to stir—"

Glenn Elliston never finished the sentence for the maiden slipped from his reach and sprang through the bushes, sending that sharp, clear challenge before her, backing it up with a cocked and leveled revolver as the eyes of the startled moonshiners turned toward her.

"I'll cripple the hand that dares to strike the first blow at Uncle Jax!"

"And I'm backing this lady's game, you understand!" cried Glenn Elliston as he reached the spot, stepping in front of his love, each hand armed with a revolver. "Think twice before you act once, gentlemen, and it may save us all serious trouble!"

The moonshiners were taken all aback. They stared at the maiden—for Lida Tredgold promptly stepped out from the friendly shadow of her gallant lover, her little hand holding without a tremor the revolver which, by chance or intent, covered Bion Barnave with its silver drop. It may be doubted whether they either saw or heard Glenn Elliston in those first few seconds of surprise; they had eyes only for that beautiful vision.

Uncle Jax was the first to discover, and in trembling, shaken tones he cried out to the maiden:

"G'way, Miss Lida! G'way, honey, fo' dese hongry debbils suck you' precious blood fo' dar'in' to stan' up fo' de ole man! G'way, honey-bird—I begs you g'way while ye kin!"

"Not while they hold you prisoner, Uncle Jax!" was the clear, resolute response. "Not until you go with me, free and unbarred!"

"Now lis'en, honey," almost coaxingly, like one who has forgotten his own peril in that of another and more precious one. "I begs you g'way right off! Den' stop—den' resk you' own precious blood fo' ole no-count niggah like Unc' Jax! Run 'way, honey—do!"

Bion Barnave turned a vicious glance upon the agitated negro, his teeth clicking sharply as he growled:

"Shut trap, you whining hypocrite! or I'll cut you to the bone!"

"Touch him if you dare, Bion Barnave!" menacingly cried Lida, impulsively taking a step forward, her weapon covering the moonshiner spy.

"Lida—Miss Tredgold—let me manage him," hurriedly muttered Elliston, again reaching her side, but not daring to lower his armed hands to check her more certainly, lest advantage be taken of the action by the moonshiners, more than one of whom he noted edging cautiously toward them.

Bion Barnave caught that plea, and showed

his teeth viciously. In hasty speech, indistinct and muffled by his bruised lips, he said:

"You couldn't suit me better than to try that on, Glenn Elliston! Step out from behind the girl, and I'll—"

"Drop in your tracks with a bullet in your brain, Bion Barnave!" interposed Lida, her voice steady as the hand that held the spy covered. "Stand back, Mr. Elliston!" with a sharpness never before heard in her voice when addressing him. "I've taken this contract, and I'll carry it to an end on my own account."

"Lucky devil!" sneered Barnave, with a mocking bow; then, straightening up, all trace of jeering gone, his voice cold and hard as he added, "You hardly realize the nature of the contract you've undertaken, I'm thinking, Miss Tredgold."

"There's just where you and I differ, Bion Barnave," was the cold retort. "I mean to save that helpless, harmless old man from your brutality, even if I have to soil my hands with your life-blood!"

"It ain't wu'ff it, honey-bird," muttered Uncle Jax, trembling as with a palsy, his skin showing a dingy brown in place of its usual glossy black. "Run 'way, dat's a honey; run 'way an' lef' de ole man ketch what's got to come."

"Gospel truth, if a nigger does say it!" grimly laughed the spy. "You can't save him by threats or pleadings, Miss Tredgold; you wouldn't want to save him if you knew—listen for one minute."

"When Uncle Jax can stand forth a free man once more, not until!"

"Uncle Jax can wait," was the cold response. "I reckon you'll be willing to suffer that, when I swear to you that Uncle Jax is working in partnership with the detective who hunted your father down for—"

"Don' you lis'en, Miss Lidy! Don' you b'liebe what lie he say!" indignantly cried the prisoner, struggling to free himself.

The action was so sudden and unexpected that he did fairly throw off the hands that grasped him, for an instant standing alone.

And then, with a wild, unearthly scream, a horseman plunged through the bushes into the little opening, swinging a long club or a reversed rifle in his hands, sweeping the startled moonshiners out of his path as by magic!

"Down, ye hissing, poisonous reptiles!" he thundered, as his steed plunged and lashed out with heels that overturned more than one of the dumfounded mountaineers. "Down, and into your holes, spawn of the evil serpent! Down at the bidding of your master!"

With every sentence the heavy rifle whirled through the air and swept all before it. A stroke leveled Bion Barnave to the earth just as his pistol exploded, and then, bending over and swinging Uncle Jax from the ground to the withers of his snorting, terrified steed, the strange champion gave vent to another wild, unearthly scream as he dashed out of the fire-lit circle, through the bushes and down the slope at breakneck speed!

And all the work of but a few fleeting seconds!

Glenn Elliston might have been as much stupefied as were the moonshiners at this strange apparition, only for the presence of his loved one. He saw her peril, for the wild horseman almost knocked her down as he entered the lighted circle, and that lent him coolness sufficient to act and to act promptly.

He caught Lida up in his arms and sprung aside out of the sweep of that terrible weapon, though he left his hat behind him, brushed from his head as he stooped to lift his precious burden. He paused on the edge of the clearing for a single backward glance; a glance that showed him Uncle Jax as the strange champion lifted him from the ground; a glance that showed him the moonshiners had lost sight of them; then he hurried away through the night, begging Lida in a whisper to keep silence for the moment.

"Let me down, Glenn," she murmured, after a few seconds. "I can walk—I am too heavy!"

A touch of his bearded lips silenced her, and with a faint sigh, she lay quiet in his arms until the light of the fire was lost to view.

Then loud and angry yells rose from the little opening where such a strange event had happened. The moonshiners were recovering from the surprise, now that the wild horsemen had vanished.

"To the house!" hurriedly uttered Lida, slipping to the ground, all her strength returning as she believed peril threatened her lover. "They'll kill you in their mad rage!"

"They've got to find me first," was the half-laughing response.

But Glenn Elliston made no objections to her action. Precious as the burden was, and loth as he might be to resign it under less pressing circumstances, he found it no sineture, this carrying a healthy girl in his arms while running at speed over such rough and tangled ground, athlete though he certainly was.

He halted a few seconds later, listening intently, to draw a much freer breath as he muttered:

"They've forgotten all about us, little one! Listen—they're chasing that strange fellow on horseback!"

"Who was it? I only caught a glimpse of his face as—"

"Enough to recognize it?" hastily interposed Elliston, a sudden suspicion finding birth in his excited brain. "You saw his face? Was it—could it be his master?"

"His—I don't think I understand what you mean, Glenn," hesitated Lida, almost shrinking from his intense eagerness.

"Uncle Jax—Milton Sarsfield, you know!"

"That—that terrible creature—Milton Sarsfield?"

"Why not, since he risked so much to save the old man?" with just a trace of impatience in his tones at her slowness of comprehension. "Would a stranger have done so much? Would any one but Sarsfield have dared face that gang after such a mad fashion? Think—you can remember Sarsfield well enough to say for certain whether or no this was he. If it was—"

"But it was not Mr. Sarsfield, Glenn," still bewilderedly.

"You are positive, Lida?" with a ring of deep disappointment in his tones. "It has been so long since you saw that—"

"Not long enough to make such a wild mistake, though," was the response, in more decided tones. "I remember Mr. Sarsfield as well as though I had seen him every day since his moving. I could draw and paint his portrait from memory, if I were to try. Remember how intimate our families were in those days."

"That was before my time, you know," said Elliston, his voice still showing traces of disappointment. "But if you are positive—"

"I am sure it was not Mr. Sarsfield. He was young and handsome, with the blackest of hair and eyes. And this strange creature had long white hair and beard that looked as though it had never been clipped. And he was so much larger and taller—not even a shade of resemblance between them, Glenn!"

"I am sorry. If it had been Milton Sarsfield—you know how much depends on our finding him, Lida. Our only hope is in finding him and proving him the real criminal."

"If he is living I will find him," slowly, resolutely she said.

They paused to listen once more, but there was nothing to be heard of the wild horseman or his pursuers, if, indeed, the moonshiners were really chasing him in the faint hope of success.

"I hardly think they will come back this way, at least to-night," said Elliston, as they once more moved toward the house. "By day-dawn there will be no further danger; before that they'll have time to see what brutes they showed themselves, and will be more afraid of meeting you than you of them."

"I have no fear—for myself. But you, dear!" murmured Lida, with a little shiver of apprehension as she clung closer to his arm. "If they should hold a grudge against you!"

Elliston laughingly reassured her, and by the time they had regained the little plateau from whence Lida first espied the coming of her lover, he had succeeded in calming her fears.

"Wait one moment, until I see if mother—"

Lida glided silently up to the house, and not a little to her relief, saw that Mrs. Tredgold was lying on the bed, peacefully sleeping. She quickly returned and announced this welcome fact.

"I'm glad of that, dear, for I want a little talk before leaving you," was the pleased response. "On business, so you need not look so shy, little one," with a low, playful laugh. "Your father said that our main hope lay in working on the fears of old Uncle Jax. You know him far better than I; is it true he is so very superstitious?"

"I never knew a colored man more so," was the quick reply.

"So I heard, but I put it down as mostly fun. The old fellow don't impress one as such a fool. In fact, I set him down as remarkably bright and sensible."

"And so you will find him on any other point than this one," was the grave response, as a cloud came over the fair brow. "He believes in ghosts and spooks and hobgoblins, and all that sort of thing; he carries a rabbit-foot and a dozen different charms and amulets; he is a devout believer in charms, spells, witch-powders and conjuring. Still, I am sadly afraid that this hope will fail us."

"What do you mean by that, Lida?"

"You know how Milton Sarsfield left him in sole charge of his property. Unless he knew him to be faithful and true—unless he knew he could trust him implicitly—would he have done this? Then what hope is there of learning anything from him that could possibly injure his old master?"

"It does look dubious, that's a fact," was the thoughtful reply, as Elliston bit at the ends of his drooping mustache, his brow corrugating. "Still, it is the only hope in sight, and I mean to work it for all it's worth! If Uncle Jax is so very superstitious, he may be so badly frightened as to let out the truth unawares. If? He shall!" with almost vicious emphasis.

"I will try to hope so, but it is not very encouraging," with a faint sigh and catching of her breath.

"If ghosts have any terror for the old fellow,

I'll guarantee to show him a whole churchyard full!" said Elliston, with a lighter, more cheerful air, assumed for the purpose of encouraging the maiden, rather than from any real hope of success. "His charms for keeping the spooks and hobgoblins at a respectful distance shall fail him from this time on! Awake or sleeping, you are a haunted man from now until the whole truth of how Pendy Rowell came by his death is published to the world, Uncle Jax!"

"Heaven grant that success may reward your efforts, Glenn!" impulsively exclaimed the maiden. "It sounds hard to plot against such a good, kind-hearted old man, but he knows that father has been charged with this awful crime, and if he is knowingly shielding the real criminal, he deserves to be punished."

"Amen! And punished he shall be, unless he is ghost-proof!"

Lida gave a start and a low, agitated cry.

"We forget—what has become of Uncle Jax? Will that terrible creature kill him? He looked like a madman!"

"And acted the character just as naturally, too," nodded Elliston, with a short laugh that was not near so cheerful or reassuring as he intended it should be. "I'll go bail Uncle Jax is at this moment safe and sound at the Pig House, chuckling over the discomfiture of his enemies."

For some little time longer the lovers remained in converse, and so well did Glenn Elliston improve his time, that when they separated, he to return to his home, she to enter the house, Lida felt that complete success was but a question of time and patience, that her father would not long have to remain under the ban.

Neither of them suspected the fact that their parting was watched and their every word overheard; but such was the case. And shortly after that parting, a dirty, ragged figure stole away from the little plateau, following silently, cautiously on the track of the young man.

CHAPTER VI.

A PHANTOM OF THE NIGHT.

It was without a thought of this strange champion that Ajax Telamon twisted free from the grip of his guards, and half-crouched to leap upon the man who falsely accused him of acting foully toward Lida Tredgold. And had that champion delayed his coming another second, it is almost certain that Bion Barnave would have had another taste of "human butter," unless he could have checked Uncle Jax with shot or blow.

As it was, Uncle Jax was to the full as greatly surprised as any one of the moonshiners by the mad charge. His back was turned in that direction, and before he could even turn his head for a glance, one of the mountaineers, reeling blindly before that terrible weapon, stumbled against him and nearly flung him prostrate. And then that mighty grip was fastened upon him—he was lifted clear of the ground and balanced across the withers of the plunging horse, one heavy hand forcibly holding him in that awkward position, face downward, head and heels dangling on either side of the snorting steed.

A final sweep of the heavy weapon, then with that wild, maniacal scream, the horseman dashed madly away through the bushes, bearing the horror-stricken negro with him.

And, though it may be doubted whether any one of those present either heard or noticed it, a choking, trembling cry was blended with that scream—a fear-shaken appeal for rescue from the lips of Uncle Jax!

On through the bushes, under the trees, among the scattered rocks and boulders, down the steep slope, slipping, sliding, stumbling, a dozen times seemingly falling headlong where death or maiming must surely follow, the snorting steed plunged on, driven by that mad rider. On, under the united impulse of voice, heel and hand. Down the slope and out over the level. Through dark shadow and silvery moonlight. Still on, as though driven by a veritable demon of the night.

And Uncle Jax?

Half-dead with fright, and wholly helpless with superstitious fear!

Once he twisted his head around enough to catch a brief glimpse of that shaggy, hair-covered face; but only once.

Twin eyes were glaring down upon him. Eyes that seemed as large as saucers, and filled with liquid fire. Eyes that fairly scorched him as he vainly strove to shrink further away. Eyes such as no mortal ever possessed.

"De debble! Kin' Heabenny Father—sabe dis po' ole niggah!"

Those were the words he tried to utter, but no ears save his own could have recognized them. Yet either they or the sound of his voice appeared to anger the wild rider, for his free hand swung forward and sinewy fingers closed like a vise upon the luckless negro's neck, not only forcing his head back and downward, but bidding fair to make that a funeral ride to Uncle Jax.

"Would you? Would you try to hiss in my very face, snake o' the night?" grated the wild horseman, leaning forward until the nearly

throttled negro could feel his hot breath coming and going on his bare crown. "Would you spit your venom out at me? Twist and writhe, coil and squirm, why don't you? Pahl!" with sudden contempt as his savage grip relaxed and his hand was outflung with a suddenness that almost toppled Uncle Jax headlong from his uneasy perch. "So easy conquered? It was hardly worth while capturing such a miserable reptile!"

"Good Massa Debble!" gasped the half-dead negro.

A wild, mocking laugh came from the white-bearded lips as that choking, quavering voice came to his ears.

"The devil—ay! I am King Satan, and you are one of my recreant imps! You have failed to perform my bidding here on earth, and now I'll take you back to my home of everlasting fire, to receive the punishment due your atrocious negligence! Did I not bid ye—"

The horse stumbled and fell to its knees, casting both rider and his captive over its head. Cat-like, active to a remarkable degree, the wild horseman struck upon his feet and before the frightened animal could escape, an iron grip was fastened upon its quivering nostrils, and the flying reins were deftly secured.

The madman turned to where Uncle Jax lay on the ground, stunned and sorely shaken, stirring the negro sharply with one foot as he said:

"Arise, ye imp o' darkness! Why do ye grovel there like a worm in the dust? Shall I bruise your head with my heel? Or—is it to kiss my royal toe that you prostrate yourself? What was it you called me but a moment ago? The devil? Ay! I'll be King Satan and you shall adore me—shall salute me as your lord and master, with power of life and death, with—so, good slave! seal the bond—thus!"

Laughing, jeering, with a mirth that was even more terrible than the insane rage he had at first shown, the wild horseman lifted one shod foot above the face of the poor negro, tapping his dust covered lips repeatedly as he spoke.

Uncle Jax made no effort to escape or resist. Even had his hands been at liberty, he would scarcely have lifted them to defend himself from this self-styled demon, for he was too badly frightened, his superstition was far too thoroughly awakened.

He heard those words, and he really believed that he had fallen into the clutches of the foul fiend. Those eyes of fire seemed to be drying up his eyeballs, and he dared not attempt to steal another look at his captor.

Meekly he submitted to the outrage. He even kissed the sole that tapped his bruised lips!

After all, it may have been the wisest course he could have followed. His submission seemed to please his strange captor, for a low, quieter laugh followed those mocking words.

"Is it so, dog of the coal-face? Yield ye, ransom or no ransom? Never again to lift hand or bear arms against your lawful lord and master—never turn in armed rebellion while water runs and grass grows?"

"Nebber mo', kin' marster!" faintly muttered Uncle Jax, still with his lids tightly closed over his eyes, still with that shivering, flesh-creeping awe upon him, body and brain.

There was no immediate answer on the part of the madman, if madman he was, as all his words and actions seemed to indicate. His head was turned and his glowing eyes directed backward, in the direction from whence they had come, even as he stooped and severed the negro's bonds.

Faint, yet unmistakable, floating on the night air, came the far-away sounds of human voices, calling to each other. The moonshiners had not yet entirely given up the hunt for the strange being who had robbed them of their prey so audaciously. They were drawing nearer. They might even then be able to sight their game, out on the level, in the full light of the even round moon as they were.

"The snarling devils are coming!" grated the strange being, with a return of his former fierceness in tone and manner. "The serpents are swarming from their holes, seeking to sting and poison and corrupt! They come—but they shall not find!"

With the grip of a giant, he caught up Uncle Jax and swung him into the saddle, then leaping to the croup with a panther-like agility. His arms passed one on each side of the trembling negro, gripping the reins and steadying the captive at one and the same time. His heels beat against the flanks of the frightened steed, and then they dashed ahead through the night once more at reckless speed.

"The serpents are swarming, good imp," the madman laughed, his voice harsh and disagreeable, his breath so hot that it seemed to fairly scorch poor Uncle Jax as it swept past his neck. "But they can only creep, while we are flying—flying faster than light! Flying on a journey to the infernal regions, good imp! Home—going home, varlet! Think of that! Home—I had a home, once!"

Despite his great terror, Uncle Jax gave a start at those words. They were so different in tone and manner, little wonder! Soft and even

musical, slow and lingering, full of a sorrow that seemed far too deep and great for bitterness.

Nor was this abrupt change confined alone to his voice. He no longer urged his panting steed on at such a reckless pace. The reins slackened and hung loose. His stern grip relaxed, and Uncle Jax could feel a tremor running through the strong arms which passed on each side of him.

Even the good steed seemed to feel the change, for its pace grew less frantic, and it gradually came down to a walk.

Poor, superstitious Uncle Jax felt a faint hope springing up in his fainting heart, and after a few moments he ventured to gasp:

"Marster—good, kin' marster!"

The madman gave a sudden start as he heard that quavering voice, and his grip suddenly tightened around the bony body of the negro. Yet his own voice was less harsh, less menacing as he uttered:

"Well, imp o' darkness?"

"Marster, let a pore ole niggah go dis time! He nebber do nuffin to hurt. He am't wuff so much trouble, 'deed he ain't, kin' marster!"

"Worth your weight in gold twice refined, Uncle Jax," with a short hard laugh that sent a fresh shiver dancing through the poor negro's frame. "I need just such a body-servant as you to help drive the blue devils away when the dark past begins to rise up before me. The past! Brush it away, ye devils!" with sudden fierceness. "Dance and sing and pour out the strong drink until the horrible visions fade away into nothingness! Drive them away before my poor brain turns mad! Mad? who says it is a liar, black and false as hell itself! I am not mad! I will not be mad! It would please them too much! Please those—Ah!"

His strained voice choked and thickened until it seemed to strangle him. One of his hands flew up to his throat, tearing at it as he gasped and panted for breath. He shivered from head to foot. His body swayed to and fro until it seemed as though he must fall from the back of his horse.

Uncle Jax caught his own breath sharply and turned his head swiftly around until his wide-open eyes could stare straight into that em-purpled, agonized face.

Had he made the attempt just then, he could almost certainly have escaped from the power of his captor. He could have hurled the quivering form to the ground with hardly an effort, then ridden away to a secure haven; but he made no such effort.

Instead, he caught the left hand of the madman in his own, while his right swung around until it pressed that shivering body up against his own back. And there was a strange eagerness in his voice as he soothingly muttered:

"We'll fool 'em, marster—'deed we'll fool 'em ef dey tink like dat! Dey ain't nobody mad but dem dat call us crazy. Dey ain't—"

The strange being seemed soothed by his voice, and the spasmodic shivering abruptly ceased. He caught a long, grateful breath, and as suddenly there came another change in his manner.

He flung off the hands of the negro, and once more took command. His voice was sharp and clear, though a little less wild, a little less menacing than before:

"Ay! we'll fool 'em, one and all, Uncle Jax! I'm fooling you now!"

He laughed, low and maliciously, with a meaning that sent a cold thrill running through the veins of the old negro, that brought back those almost banished superstitious fancies.

Was it fancy? Was this strange being fooling him after all?

With a sickening fear at his heart, Uncle Jax mustered courage to turn his head and steal another glance into that hairy face. To meet those blazing orbs again. To see a laughing, mocking devil in them. To shrink and shiver anew as his captor chuckled grimly:

"Fooling you, too, Uncle Jax! Isn't it glorious sport? Isn't it well worth being called the foul fiend to be endowed with his supernatural powers? To go and come as one wills? To see poor mortals shake and shiver and cringe and cower before the bare glance of one's eye? To feel that the whole world is one's footstool, and all the reptiles crawling upon its surface one's slaves? Ay! 'tis glorious! glorious!"

"'Deed yes, kin' marster," faintly muttered Uncle Jax, fearing to speak, yet not daring to maintain silence while that strange being bent over his shoulder with glaring eyes, evidently expecting an answer.

"You lie, Uncle Jax!" sharply grated his captor, closing his arms until the pressure seemed about to crush in the poor fellow's ribs. "It is ten thousand times worse than death, this horrible existence! Death!" with a short, hollow laugh, "that would be a boon more blessed than ever yet befell mortal being. If it would only come—if it would only come to give me eternal rest!"

There was a depth of wretchedness in his tones that words are powerless to measure. He seemed terribly in earnest as he uttered that moan, but Uncle Jax dared not turn his head, dared not again entertain that wild, banished hope of a

short time ago. And the next moment but served to strengthen that belief.

The strange being laughed, low and mockingly as he again touched up his jaded horse. Again his shaggy chin crept over the shoulder of his captive, and once more he scorched him with those glowing orbs.

"Growing wiser, are you, Uncle Jax? Cunn-ing old rascal! But I'll fool you yet—fool you to the top of your bent, give me time! For I'm the devil, Uncle Jax; Satan himself, out for a holiday. Say I'm the devil, Uncle Jax!"

"Yes, kin' marster," faltered the poor old man, shivering.

"The devil, Uncle Jax, though you might doubt it at first glance, since I left my horns and hoofs and forked tail behind me, the better to fool these silly creatures, Uncle Jax! Let them once catch sight of my ornaments—for they are ornaments, and ornaments such as any one might be proud of, Uncle Jax! Say that you wish you had horns an' hoofs and a forked tail, Uncle Jax! Swear it by the book, Uncle Jax!"

"Yes, kin' marster," faltered the negro. "Unc' Jax he done took de oaf; wish he had tail an'—an' all dem fings. Cross he heart."

"Another lie, Uncle Jax," with a malicious chuckle that frightened his helpless victim far more than if it had been a savage oath. "Do you know what the priests say? Do you know what is the fate in store for all those who lie? Doomed to hell, Uncle Jax! Doomed to come to my realms to serve me there, even as they served me here on earth. Uncle Jax, you're my slave from this moment henceforward!"

Uncle Jax groaned, but he could make no other response. His superstitious awe was now too intense for free speech. He really believed he had fallen alive into the hands of the foul fiend himself, and he anticipated nothing better than an ultimate descent into the evil pit whose frightful horrors he had so often listened to as described by fervent preachers, both of his own race and of the whites.

What he suffered during those minutes words are powerless to fitly describe, or an enlightened mind to even faintly conceive. He was so completely saturated with suspicion, gross and all-credulous, that the wildly malicious taunts and assertions of this madman, if madman he may be called, were received as others might receive Gospel truth. He never once thought of doubting what he heard. He made no effort to escape, for what would it avail him? Only to hasten his punishment; only to increase the tortures which he felt positive were in store for him.

His wretchedness was complete. He took no note of time. He paid no attention to the course they were following. For all he could have told, just then, they might have been riding thus for an age!

His captor rung the changes with a persistency that knew no fatigue. Now he was grimly jocose, only to be savagely vehement or maudlin unto tears the next moment. Now he was content to jog along moderately, letting the jaded animal pick its own course and choose its own gait, only to drive his heels viciously into its flanks and urge it madly on in the next breath.

Meekly, tremblingly, Uncle Jax spoke what was demanded of him, said the words which his malicious captor put into his mouth. His subjection was complete; his misery even more so.

Erect and stiff he sat in the saddle, his bony fingers tightly locked before him, fearing to make a move more than he could help, lest he awaken the ire of his dread captor behind. Each shiver and tremor that involuntarily agitated his frame gave him double pain, lest it be taken as a handle for that demon to grasp in anger. Stiff and erect, more like a galvanized corpse than a living, breathing, sentient being, Uncle Jax stared straight ahead of him, but with eyes that seldom saw what they drew near, with a brain that refused to photograph aught.

Until, without word or warning, just as they were crossing a strip of dense shadow, just as they emerged into a band of clear moonlight, only a few rods in width, riding at a mad pace for the instant, a shadowy figure suddenly uprose before them in the bright light, one white hand uplifted as though to bar their passage—the figure of a woman, tall and queenly, even when viewed by the moonlight.

A cry of amazement broke in a hoarse gurgle from the lips of the startled negro as he saw that form, as he caught sight of that white face, showing ghastly pale in the light of the moon. And over his shoulder came a scream that was almost a wail of agony!

The snorting steed was wrenched up until its haunches almost touched the earth its hoofs scored so deeply, checked within its own length.

But only for an instant. That wild screech was still echoing on the air when a yell of savage fury broke from the lips of the wild rider, and he urged the frightened horse forward, direct for that ghost-like figure in the road!

A snort and a mad plunge—a cry that rung out sharply—then on thundered the mad horseman, sending back a shrill, triumphant laugh!

A cry of horror broke from the old negro, and

he half turned in the saddle, but before the words that rose in his throat could find utterance, the madman caught him by the neck with both hands, gripping him with frightful violence, snarling, foaming at the mouth, grinding out some words that Uncle Jax could not distinguish.

In his fear of death, his superstitious fears were momentarily forgotten, and he desperately grappled with his assailant, striving to free his throat from that horrible, strangling grip.

The struggle was brief, luckily for poor Uncle Jax. The madman laughed savagely as he twisted him from his seat and hurled him headlong to the ground. And as Uncle Jax lay there, a quivering, senseless mass, the wild rider sped away, his fiercely triumphant laugh floating back on the night air.

Uncle Jax was stunned by the fall, but his insensibility did not last so very long. A faint groan bubbled forth from his lips, as he faintly lifted his head, dizzily staring around him. All his superstition had returned, and he expected no less than to find himself down in the legendary pit of everlasting flames.

"Not dar—it cain't be dat bad place!" he gasped, with a flutter at his heart that almost suffocated him. "Dey ain't no fiah—I don't smell no brimstone nor—bress de heabenly Father!" with a gasp of intense relief and joy so great that he came perilously near swooning away as he caught sight of the clear, full moon in the sky.

Not dead! Not in the infernal regions! And that horrible creature gone—was he gone?

With a gasp of terror Uncle Jax brushed a hand across his dim eyes, and summoned up courage enough to glance swiftly around in quest of what he prayed in his heart of hearts he might fail to discover: the dread being who had declared himself Satan out for a holiday!

Nowhere in sight—gone! And as he fully realized this glad truth, Uncle Jax felt his strength return, and he scrambled to his feet, his one thought being of hasty flight lest the demon should repent and come back to recover his prey.

It was only chance that kept him from taking the direction in which the wild rider had disappeared, chance that prevented his heading toward the spot where that phantom of the night had so suddenly sprung up in the path. His only thought was to leave that spot as speedily as possible, lest the dread demon return to recapture him.

Uncertainly at first, despite his terror, for his limbs were benumbed and bruised by his fall and his wrists still felt the effect of those tight bonds, but then with increased speed as he regained control of his muscles. And when another searching glance around assured him that he was as yet unpursued, Uncle Jax grew calmer, more like his usual self.

For the first time he thought of making out his location, and a little cry escaped his lips as he recognized the landmarks. Strange as it seemed at first, he knew that he had been carried within a short half-mile of the Big House.

"Ef I kin on'y git dar fu'st!" he muttered, increasing his pace as he slightly altered his course. "Ef it's all right—ef I fin' dey ain't no bad luck come while I bin gone!"

He shivered as the last sentence passed his lips, and broke into a run that showed a fair remnant of suppleness and wind.

He cast no more glances backward, as though he had for the time being forgotten his superstitious fear. He looked only ahead, giving a great gasp of relief as he caught his first glimpse of the Big House which Milton Sarsfield had left wholly in his charge.

What he expected or anticipated, would be difficult to say, but it was clear that the sight of the large, square building, with its wide verandas, its vine-clad sides, its many out-buildings, gave him intense relief.

Straight up to the front he ran, panting heavily, his limbs trembling with excitement and exhaustion, after all he had that night passed through. He stooped at the base of the front veranda, fumbling around for a moment, then rising up with a key in his hand. He unlocked the door, entering and pausing to close it again and renew the fastenings. All was dark, but he did not require the aid of his eyes to complete these precautions. Long use had made him perfectly familiar with the Big House and all its details.

Uncle Jax paused to listen, his head bent, his breath suspended. All was silent. He seemed to be the only occupant of that great building.

Silently slipping off his shoes, Uncle Jax crept along through the dark rooms, passing toward the back of the building. Time and again he paused to listen, as though in expectation of hearing some sound, but as often moving on again, with a long breath of relief.

In one of the rear rooms he stooped and swept his hand across the floor, drawing back as he did so. And had there been a light in that room, a curious trap-door might have been noticed as it opened beneath his touch: irregular in outlines, with planks protruding unevenly at either end. Let this trap be closed, and no one not in the secret would for an instant suspect its existence:

if noticed at all, it would give the impression that in this room the flooring had been laid with the ends and remnants left over after finishing the other floors.

Down through this trap Uncle Jax crept, still in silence, still in perfect darkness. Silently the trap closed over his head.

Minute after minute passed without a sound coming back to betray his further doings. All was still as death.

Then the trap-door opened, and Uncle Jax emerged into the room. He lowered it once more, stooping and sweeping his hands over the closed joints, as though to make sure naught was left to excite suspicion, then he drew a long breath as of intense relief.

Passing into another room he struck a match and lit a candle. By its growing light his face showed worn and haggard, filled with a sorrow that came from the depths of his aching heart.

He dropped to his knees beside the low cot on which his nights were passed, bowing his head over his tightly clasped hands. His gaunt frame shook as with stifled sobs. And ere long groans and sighs and broken sentences fell from his lips, muffled, yet articulate.

"Holy Father in heaben! gib Dy po', weak sarbent strength to b'ar dis burden! Keep him faithful to de las'! Hol' him up in de holler ob Dy han' when he turns faint an' weary! Not fo' he own sake—not fo' he own sake, deah Marster!"

CHAPTER VII.

"CUNJUR KING SAUL."

THE Big House had a deserted air until a late hour the next day, when Uncle Jax first made his appearance outside of the building.

Badly worn and woefully dilapidated the old fellow looked, though it was evident enough that the brush and needle had been at work on his rudely treated garments but neither brush or needle could remedy those bruises on his jetty skin, nor banish those swollen circles about his sunken, bloodshot eyes.

More like one after a protracted spree, than his usual prim, dignified self, looked Uncle Jax that bright, pleasant day. And there was a hesitating, dubious, fearful air about all he did that betrayed a mind ill at ease, if not full of dread or loaded down with sin.

More like a hunted fugitive he peered out through a crack of the slightly opened door, closely scanning his surroundings before fairly venturing forth. And even then, when thus far reassured, Uncle Jax would start and jump and shiver spasmodically at the most ordinary sounds: at the crowing of a cock, the flap of a wing, the stamp of cow or horse lazily fighting flies. Start and glare around him with wild eyes, seemingly ready to break into flight.

Several times he did actually run away as he caught sight of some person passing along the road, entering the house and shivering there with bated breath until assured that the danger had passed him by.

Twice that day there were rappings at the front door, but Uncle Jax never answered the summons. Hiding his face in his hands he cowered in the dark corner, shivering, shaking, trembling until the callers grew tired of knocking without being answered, and went their way.

All this was very unlike the usual demeanor of Uncle Jax. According to the verdict of the majority, he was just a little a't "to put on frills." A little prone to showing his importance as manager of the Sarsfield place. To hold his head high as the best, and just as though his skin was white as alabaster.

And yet, bearing in mind all that had befallen the old man on the night last past, it is not so much to be wondered at that Uncle Jax should be uneasy and suspicious.

He had awakened the dark suspicions of those whom he knew to be engaged, more or less extensively, in moonshine whisky. He had been accused of playing the spy upon them, and of joining their bitterest enemy in a secret campaign against them as a body.

"Dat was a dirty, brack lie, but I couldn't prove it so den!" the old fellow muttered with a frown and a shake of his frosty pow. "When dey ax Unc' Jax wha' fo' he be dar, so long way f'um home, in de mids' ob de dark night, how Unc' Jax gwine fo' tell 'em de trufe! 'Deed he des couldn't!" bowing his head with a low, dejected groan.

As Bion Barnave had reasoned, it was no ordinary cause that drew the superstitious negro so far from home at that "witching hour;" but that cause had nothing to do with Andrew Tottle, or "Curly Rooks," as the moonshiner spy declared the self-acknowledged bushwhacker to be. Thus far, at least, Uncle Jax had spoken the truth. Until the fugitive led his pursuers fairly upon the cowering negro, and thus frightening him into frantic flight, Ajax Telamon did not know that such a person lived and drew the breath of life.

Strong and pressing interests had drawn him into the hills so far from home at that ghostly hour; and strong indeed they must have been to so far conquer his superstitious dread of darkness and its spookish inhabitants.

He had caught sight of the fire from a distance, and hoping amid his doubts that here he would

find what he was seeking, Uncle Jax cautiously crept nearer and nearer, until the explosion came with the unmasking of Curly Rooks.

What followed has been explained with sufficient clearness. Now that his brain was clearer, his wits more collected, Uncle Jax shook his frosty pow with an air of mingled disgust and shame. He could see what serious mistakes he had made in both word and action. If he had not tried to escape by flight, at the first! If he had boldly faced the excited moonshiners and quietly proved his innocence, as he might readily have done, all would have been well.

"But dey done skeered 'way what little sense de old man ebber had wid dar 'stropolis ram-pagin' an' snashin' ob teef—dey des *did*!" Uncle Jax muttered, with a vexed shake of the head. "Skeer a niggah to deff, den bloody butcher him 'ca'se he don' talk a blue streak o' Gospel trufe to—*Dar dey come*!"

With a muffled howl he crouched down and ran for shelter, as he had done on more than one occasion before, with no better foundation for his affright. Only a playful whirlwind lifting up a little column of dust and leaves, instead of the bloodthirsty moonshiners coming in force to carry out their fierce threats of the past night.

As the day wore on Uncle Jax became more at ease in his mind, so far as the moonshiners were concerned. If they still believed him a dangerous traitor to their interests, surely they would have pounced upon him before this?

"Mebbe dey done skeered to try—mebbe dey fink de debble dat tote Un' Jax 'way f'um dar, hangin' nigh de place still!"

It was not a pleasant thought, even in this connection, and the old darky shivered anew as he cast a swift, apprehensive glance around.

What if it was true? What if that demon was indeed nigh at hand? What if he should suddenly make his appearance and once more fasten his terrible grip on arm or shoulder?

Uncle Jax instinctively thrust a trembling hand into his bosom, feeling for the precious charm which was no longer there—for the all-potent rabbit-foot which he had lost after some strange fashion! With it and daylight he would not have been so readily frightened, but without it he felt lost. If he could only find it, or procure another!

This thought seemed to grow upon him as the sun passed the meridian and slipped down toward the west. His uneasiness seemed to grow greater. He vibrated more frequently from resolve to doubt. He cast longing, wistful glances in the direction of the little hut where the wonderful "hoodoo man" lived, muttering and shaking his head, a sort of human pendulum between the Big House and the front gate.

It was quite late in the afternoon before superstition finally won the victory and Uncle Jax came stealing out of the house and down the graveled walk to the front gate. But that barrier once passed, the old negro had nothing more to do with doubt or hesitation, hastening along toward the distant hut of "Cunjur King Saul," the mighty Voudou Doctor.

The intervening distance was considerable, but Uncle Jax was not long in covering it. He showed no signs of age or bruises in his movements now. He was going to receive a charm that would prove a perfect safeguard against all such luckless mishaps as had befallen him of late, and that timbered his stiff joints.

"Nuffin' like dat could 'a' happened ef dat yabbit-foot didn't done git lost some mighty 'sterious way—no, sah!" muttered Uncle Jax with a solemn shake of his head as he hurried around an interposing clump of dense brambles. "Gits me! Whar it go? How he come los' in sech a mighty hurry? Debbble got a fingah in dat, now I tell ye! Ole debbble done cunjur Unc' Jax to lose de yabbit-foot, so he git deff-grip on he white wool, reckon! Come mighty nigh doin' ob it, too—*deedy*!"

But as Uncle Jax drew near his present destination, his face grew long and sober enough; even anxious and almost awe-stricken.

This Cunjur King Saul was no ordinary being, be sure! None of your "common truck," to use the vernacular.

From whence he came, no one appeared to know. When first noticed, he was settled as snugly in his little cabin hid away in the heart of the hills, where the dense treetops made it twilight at noonday, as though he had been there when the country was first made. What his real name was no less a mystery. "Cunjur King Saul" he had announced himself, and Cunjur King Saul he remained to one and all ever since.

Where there are negroes, even the lowest grade of "hoodoo doctors" will flourish, living on their superstitious dupes; but let one of real pretensions to witchcraft make his appearance, and his fame will spread on the wings of the wind. Believers will come for miles and miles to consult him, to purchase his charms and buy his potions. Each cure, each "miracle" will find a thousand tongues to repeat and exaggerate it, until his reputation becomes so fixed that a single sneer or whispered doubt against his powers is regarded as almost blasphemy.

Not even Marie Laveaux, the Voudou Queen, could boast more devoted disciples than Cunjur King Saul, nor was her reputation much more

widely extended. Indeed, there were not wanting those who declared that the Carolina magician could perform greater marvels than even the New Orleans sibyl herself.

Little marvel, then, that Uncle Jax grew grave and even frightened as he came nearer the hut where this mighty man of mystery resided, or that he slackened his pace and nearly came to a halt as that hut first met his gaze.

Yet this was not his first visit, by many. More dollars than one had Uncle Jax left in that low, rickety-looking shanty beneath the shadowing trees, taking away charms and amulets and potions instead. But each visit had only added to his original awe of the strange being who dwelt here in solitude, so far as human companionship was concerned.

He was still hesitating, when a shrill, peculiar voice rung out:

"Hi, you niggah! why fo' you stop out dah? T'ink Cunjur King Saul nuffin' bettah fo' tek up he precious time dan waitin' fo' a fool niggah mek up he min' ef he fotch money 'nough to pay fo' de yabbit-foot? *Huh!* wuss dan lose de yabbit-foot come 'pon you, Unc' Jax! Wuss luck dan *dat* hang ober you' head, ole niggah!"

The door of the hut was flung open, and the figure of Cunjur King Saul made its appearance in the narrow opening.

Of medium size, trim-built, as could be seen despite the disguising attire which covered him from neck to ankles; an odd combination of the masculine and feminine—half dressing-gown, half dress. This was open from the waist down, parting sufficiently to allow a glimpse of trousers, beaded and embroidered, decked with gay ribbons. Still lower, long, flat feet with ape-like toes, guiltless of sock or shoes.

Upon his head, Cunjur King Saul wore a crown or circlet of feather-work, bound together with tarnished gilt braid. About his neck were several strands of brightly-polished brass beads, and his long, claw-like fingers were decked with ornaments of the same base metal.

His face was fairly regular in feature. His skin of a light yellow hue; if Cunjur King Saul had been a less important personage, he would have been called, in the vulgate, "a saddle-colored nigger."

"Beg pardon, sah—didn't know but you was busy, sah!" mumbled Uncle Jax, doffing his hat—not the long-cherished beaver, but a straw substitute—and bowing humbly before the hoodoo man.

"Didn't know nuffin'!" sniffed King Saul, his thin nose rising still higher in the air, with a lofty scorn. "Ef Cunjur King Saul done bin busy, you nebbah come dis nigh de house, sah! Sperrets done grab you so quick it done mek you' head swim lak a duck—des so!"

"Den I kin come in, sah?" hesitated the old man, shivering afresh as he cast a covert glance around as though expecting to feel the ice-cold grip of the hinted guards.

"Ain't I bin tellin' you come in, niggah? Want me git down on hunkers an' beg you come in? Want me—Cunjur King Saul?"

Morally crushed by this atrocious insinuation, Uncle Jax meekly advanced, not daring to pause even when it seemed as though he must actually thrust the hoodoo doctor aside in order to cross the threshold. But Cunjur King Saul did not force him to such extremities. Satisfied with exerting his authority thus far, he stepped back, frowning and grumbling, seemingly in the worst of ill humors.

It was part of his stock in trade, and it worked to admiration, as past experience had amply proved. It was something different from what his customers were accustomed to before his advent. Other hoodoo doctors met them with smiles and smirks and bowings, plainly anticipating a pecuniary profit from that interview. Not so the shrewd practitioner. Instead of smiles, he dealt out scowls. Gave abuse for compliments. Seemed annoyed by their coming, and anxious for their departure; but when his customers did go, they invariably left their money behind them, and never without feeling that they had gotten the best of the bargain.

Cunjur King Saul was a student of human nature, it appeared!

Uncle Jax meekly dropped into a chair which past visits told him was reserved for customers. He held his hat before him with both hands after that peculiar fashion which so plainly indicates embarrassment. He glanced shyly, appealingly, at the stern, scornful face of the conjurer who stood before him with arms folded across his chest.

"You know what a mighty fool niggah you is des now, ole man?" the hoodoo doctor demanded, bluntly.

"Reckon I be—ef you say so, sah," mumbled Uncle Jax, shifting uneasily on his seat, his eyes drooping.

"I does say so, niggah, an' I tell you why ef you lis'en sharp!"

"I lis'enin', sah."

"You done los' de charmed yabbit-foot I done gib you, an'—"

"Deed I didn't go to do it, sah! Cross my heart!"

"Hol' you' hush, cain't you?" was the sharp interjection as Cunjur King Saul frowned black-

ly. "I cross you' heart wid a spook-fingah, ef you ketch me up like dat nuddah time! When I talk, it's me! You heah?"

Uncle Jax nodded meekly, tightly compressing his lips lest they again betray him.

"You fink it 'cause you los' dat charmed yabbit-foot all dis yer' trouble come 'pon you. You fink dat all you got to do is to come heah an' lay down yo' money fo' buy nuddah charm, eh? Why you mek me ax twice, you dumb niggah? Can't you speak nuffin' 'tall?"

"I pay de price, double over, sah, an' be glad fo' git de chance!" tremblingly exclaimed Uncle Jax, dropping his hat as he hurriedly sought to get out his purse.

Cunjur King Saul flung back his head with a toss that almost deprived his head of its crowning ornament, his voice sharp and cold.

"Wait, niggah, I ain't axed fo' see you' money, has I? Wait you bettah ontwell de right time comes fo' talkin' pay. Wait fo' see ef pay kin save you' soul—debbles hain't got mighty little use fo' gol' an' silber, now I tell ye, boy!"

Uncle Jax shivered until the chair beneath him sent out a doleful creaking sound. He shrunk within his garments until they seemed miles too wide for his bony frame. His glossy color faded to a dingy, ashy brown, and his bloodshot eyes protruded painfully.

Cunjur King Saul was watching him keenly, though covertly, and this utter subjection appeared to satisfy him, for his manner changed suddenly and completely. From insolent he grew grave and even kindly, after a certain blunt, grim fashion.

"Ef de debbles hain't got a fingah in it, den it look mighty nigh like de debbles wuk, Unc' Jax! Anyway, 'tain't des de loss ob dat yabbit-foot dat ails you. Dat bad luck, but dis mattah heap wuss dan bad luck. Unc' Jax, you done git cunjured mighty bad, now I tell you *hard!*"

"Deed I is, sah!" groaned the poor old negro, bowing his head on his trembling hands and swaying his body to and fro. "Feels pow'ful weak an' ailin', I does!"

"Whar 'bouts you feel de wu'st sickness, Unc' Jax?" softly asked the hoodoo doctor, bending over the sufferer and touching him lightly with his hands in limbs and body. "Kin you nail de sickness down to any ticklar spot, or is it a sortah all-oberishness, like?"

"All ober—pow'ful bad, sah!" moaned the wretched dupe, actually suffering through his too active imagination. "Gi' me somefin' doc-tah, fo' I go clean distracted crazy!"

"Hol' up you' head—so!" muttered King Saul, forcing Uncle Jax to obey by catching him beneath the chin and pulling upward. "Now look me yight in de two eyes—look *hard!* Hol' you breff an' say in you' own mind dat you ain't sick no longah! You *ain't* sick—de sickness done gone—*clean gone!*"

"Bress goodness dat so!" gasped Uncle Jax, with a long breath.

The hoodoo doctor laughed softly as he withdrew his hand, and there was an echo of triumph in his voice as he muttered, seemingly to himself:

"I said begone, an' it went like a flash! Dat show it ain't no debbles wuk, dough it mighty pow'ful hoodoo fo' all dat! Tek heap trouble an' mighty fine cunjurin' to git de best ob dis spell! Unc' Jax?"

"Yes, sah!"

"Mighty bad way, Unc' Jax—big cunjur spell put on you dis time, ole man! What wicked fing you bin doin' to mek you open to sech a 'tack like dis yer'? What you bin doin', boy?"

"Nuffin'—nuffin' 'tall, sah; fo' suah I ain't, sah!"

"Unc' Jax, you lyin' right to my face!" was the sharp, menacing retort. "Tell me you ain't bin doin' nuffin'! Tell me I'm a fool? Don't I know? Cain't I see? Ain't de smell ob blood in my nose? Who you bin cuttin', Uncle Jax?"

Swift and forcible came this last query, and as it passed his lips the doctor bent until he stared keenly into the face of his patient.

Uncle Jax shivered and shrunk back, his lips parting, but no articulate sound escaping them.

"Blood—I kin smell it, Unc' Jax!" rumbled the conjurer, his tones coming from the depths of his chest. "It smells old, but it's blood—white blood, Uncle Jax? Whose body dat blood come from, eh?"

Ajax Telamon gave a sudden start, shaking himself much as a dog does on emerging from the water. A more rational light leaped into his eyes and his voice was almost steady as he spoke:

"Deed I nebbah cut nobody, sah. Ef it's blood you smell—dar!" with something like exultation in his tones as he added: "Mebbe it's dat—mebbe it's what I butted out'n de nose ob dat Bion Barnave las' night! 'Deed it mus' be dat, sah!"

Cunjur King Saul rose erect as he drew back a pace, a dark frown wrinkling his brows. There was something like sullen anger in his voice as he spoke again:

"It's older blood dan dat, Unc' Jax. It ain't nose-bleed dat I smell, neider. It's blood dat dried up long time ago. But, nebbah mind.

Mebbe a cross wind fool me fer once. Mebbe it hain't got nuffin' to do wid the spell dat on you now."

"Dat was on, sah," faintly ventured the old man, with a wistful glance toward the closed door, as though he wished himself out in the open air and far away from that mystic spot.

"De spell dat's on you dis werry 'dential minnit, Unc' Jax, I said," coldly retorted King Saul. "De sickness sleepin' des now, 'cause I put a counter-spell ober it, but dat las' only while you in reach ob dis eye. Go out dar—git off out ob my sight—an' you curl up wid de wu'st spell o' sickness an' mis'ry inside dat ebber niggah go die wid—I tell you plain, boy."

Uncle Jax groaned and shifted uneasily in his chair, as though he was beginning to feel a returning twinge.

"Mebbe I kin dribe dot sickness 'way fo' good, but I don't say dat I dead suah, Unc' Jax," added the doctor in milder tones. "I ain't like dem low, common hoodoo coons, dat say dey kin do what cain't be did nohow an' noways; dat ain't my sort, sah! I say I *try!*"

"You nebbah fail yit, sah, dey say."

"Not many times, ef I do say so," with a gleam in his bright eyes that betokened self-pride of no slight degree. "Dut dar one sort ob cunjurin' dat I cain't do nuffin' wid, an' ef dat sort ob spell put on you, Unc' Jax, bettah go home an' putt yo' house in readiness fo' de comin' ob darkness! I cain't save yo' den. Nobody cain't save yo'. You dead while yo' still breave, Unc' Jax."

"What kin' ob spell is dat, sah?" quavered the old man.

"Corpse wu'k, boy!" suddenly replied the doctor, his keen eyes keeping close watch over his dupe, noting the slightest change of features. "Cunjurin' dat's got a dead body into it. An' de body ob a dead white man am de wu'st ob all. Hope it ain't nuffin' ob dat kin' you got put on you, Unc' Jax?"

Uncle Jax shivered and turned still more ashen in the face as the hoodoo doctor rapidly uttered these sentences. It seemed almost as if the old man would drop from his seat in a state of collapse, but he made a desperate effort to rally as King Saul turned away to fumble among the articles which cumbered a small table across the room.

"Do what you kin, sah," he said, his voice so steady that it startled even himself. "Dey ain't no corpse-wu'k in dis spell, I don't reckon. I ain't done nuffin' to desarb no sech bitter black mis'ry as dat!"

"Hope it turn out all right, Unc' Jax," was the grave response, as King Saul stirred up the fire in the little stove in one corner of the room, dropping powdered herbs into an iron pot, where water was already simmering. "Don't look lak anybody hab a call fo' put dat spell on you. People talk mighty kind 'bout Unc' Jax Sarsfield. Nebber say one crooked wu'd whar my ears done ketch 'em—an' dem ears mighty keen, too. 'Deed dey is, boy!"

"What you gwine do, sah, ef I kin ax de question?" ventured the old man, as King Saul began making mysterious motions over the now boiling water.

"Gwine to show you who put spell on you, boy," was the grave response, with a glance over his shoulder. "Dat come fu'st. Fin' out who cunjur you, den it easy to say which de bes' way to break dat spell, an' tek de cunjur off."

"Gwine fetch him right in yer'?" stammered Uncle Jax.

Cunjur King Saul laughed softly.

"Fetch his spook, not his libbin' body, boy—don't be a fool!"

Uncle Jax seemed far from satisfied at this charming prospect. If anything must appear in response to the gibberish which the hoodoo doctor was muttering over the bubbling pot, with many strange gestures and signs in the air, a bodily presence would give him far less uneasiness than that of a spirit!

"Git ready to watch, niggah!" rumbled the Cunjur King, drawing back a little from the stove and taking a folded paper from his bosom, his nimble fingers unfolding it and holding the open end above the pot. "Step dis way—quick! Too late fo' lingah now, boy!" with sudden sharpness as Uncle Jax showed more of an inclination to break through the closed door in headlong flight than to draw nearer.

With a cat-like leap King Saul caught the trembling negro by the arm and dragged him forward, casting a white powder into the boiling water as he did so.

Instantly a hissing sound followed, and a cloud of steam rose from the bubbling water, curling over in folds, and hiding the rear wall of the hut from view. Until King Saul gave one vigorous puff, that parted the filmy veil in the center, leaving a frame-like opening. And in this opening there became distinctly visible the head and face of a man!

A face, white and ghastly, with staring eyeballs, with black hair that seemed dripping wet, with bloodless cheeks and purple, livid lips.

"Look, Unc' Jax!" rumbled King Saul, holding his visitor with a giant grip and pointing at the vision with his right hand. "Dar de one dat put a spell on you! Who is he? You know him? What name he go by?"

There was no answer in words. Uncle Jax stood like one suddenly transformed into marble staring with widely distended eyes at the pale and ghastly vision through the steam which was now slowly closing in as though to swallow up that dread spectacle.

"Speak, Unc' Jax!" more sharply commanded the hoodoo doctor, his grip tightening. "Who own dat face? It look like de face ob a dead man! Is dat whar I git my smell ob blood? Who kill him, Unc' Jax?"

Still no answer, still no move or motion on the part of the old man. Straight at the ghastly face he stared, like one in a dream.

"Speak, you fool!" thundered King Saul, his face fairly convulsed with excitement and fury. "Who kill dat man? What you done dat mek him cunjur you? Quick! ef dat face fade away fore your answer, debble can't break de spell on you den!"

"He only shields the guilty being," came in sepulchral accents from those livid lips. "Milton Sarsfield murdered me, and flung me into the river. My name was Pandy Rowell, in life!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BION BARNAVE TAKES AN OATH.

LIDA TREDGOLD shrunk back from the door, a little frown darkening her fair face. She glanced quickly from side to side, strongly tempted to cross the threshold and try to slip away unperceived through the shrubbery; but at the same moment she saw that this thought came too late for successful working.

She would be seen, and surely intercepted. Better a meeting here in the house, where she would have the company of her mother, than out in the hills, with none to check an insolence born of baffled hopes.

It was late in the evening, or afternoon, of the day following the night whose adventures have been recorded, when Lida caught sight of a tall, athletic figure drawing near the little house on the plateau, and had no difficulty in recognizing it as that of Bion Barnave. His designation was equally certain, for in a few moments she felt a wild desire to flee from the spot rather than meet him face to face.

She had said nothing to her mother concerning the exciting scene in which she had taken a part on the past night, not wholly because she now realized her actions had been hasty and imprudent. If it was to do over again, Lida felt that she would act in precisely the same manner. But she knew how poorly her mother was feeling, and how little it took to seriously agitate her, though at the moment she might appear to bear up bravely.

There were certain complications in this case, too, that made it a delicate one to handle just rightly. Lida loved Glenn Elliston, and had acknowledged as much. She considered herself engaged to him, though there had been no formal betrothal. Owen Tredgold had expressed his full approval, but her mother had more than withheld hers.

"He shall never be son of mine!" she declared, with almost hysterical violence. "He was a traitor to his State in her time of need! He fought against her rights, and helped to rivet her shackles afresh! You are no child of mine if you ever join hands with him, Lida!"

Nor was this all; while refusing to treat Glenn Elliston with anything more than a frigid politeness, Mrs. Tredgold never tired of sounding the praises of another suitor, drawing very disagreeable comparisons between them, never losing an opportunity of pulling down Elliston while lifting up Bion Barnave.

The mere fact of her being seen out at such a late hour of the night in company with Glenn Elliston, would be bad enough in the eyes of her mother, Lida well knew; but how much worse when she learned that her daughter had threatened Bion Barnave with a revolver before the neighbors—and this simply to save a negro from the lash!

Of course Lida knew that the whole truth must come out, sooner or later, but she could not bring herself to be the one to tell the tale. The longer it could be delayed the better. Mrs. Tredgold was weaker than usual to-day. The bad news brought by Glenn Elliston had severely shaken her enfeebled nerves, and she had only a short time before risen from her bed.

Mrs. Tredgold saw Lida pause and shrink back, and with her senses sharpened by sickness that was more nervous than physical, she divined something of the truth.

"Who is it, child? There is somebody coming?"

"Mr. Barnave, I believe," was the reluctant response.

"You mean Bion, Lida," with sudden acidity in her weakened voice, and a sparkle in her large, dark eyes that might almost be called vixenish. "It used to be Bion, before that odious Glenn Elliston came!"

"Shall I tell him you are too poorly to receive callers, mother?" hurriedly uttered the maiden, her eyes downcast, her cheeks paling, but giving no other signs that those hard words had reached her ears.

"I am feeling very well—better than usual, in fact. It will do me good to see a caller, and one who is a gentleman, for all your silly prejudice

against him, Lida. Wish I could say as much for all who have come here of late days!" with sudden bitterness.

"You will wish to talk with him, mother, and I—I am not feeling very bright this evening. If I might run out for a breath of fresh air for a few moments, while Mr. Barnave is with you, I'm sure it—"

A quick, firm step drawing near, added to the warning gesture of the invalid, prevented Lida from completing her sentence. And in answer to her pleading look, Mrs. Tredgold frowningly shook her head, to break into a wan smile as Bion Barnave paused at the door, lifting his hat with a courtly bow.

A little the worse for wear. Uncle Jax had made a "center-shot" when he dashed his bullet-head into the face of his captor, and it would be many a long day before Bion Barnave could call himself as handsome as he undoubtedly was a moment before that blow was given and received.

His nose was swollen to twice its usual size, purple and tender, liberally barked. His cheeks were bruised, his lips cut and puffed out far beyond their usual dimensions, despite the cooling applications he had used for hours that day. Unfortunately for him, Bion Barnave was too busily occupied to give his bruises prompt attention, and when he did find the time, it was too late to be of much effect in keeping down the swelling or moderating the rainbow tints.

Mrs. Tredgold must have noticed his battered condition, but she gave no sign as she smiled upon Bion Barnave and bade him enter, motioning Lida to place a chair for their visitor.

"I have been expecting you all day, dear friend," she said, the faint color fading from her thin face, and that peculiar, hunted look returning to her dark eyes. "I heard you were expected home from town, and I knew you would bring the latest news of—of Mr. Tredgold."

"I have been detained by important business which I could not postpone, dear madam," said Barnave, with a covert glance in the direction of the maiden, as though to point his meaning. "And then—it is very hard to bring unwelcome tidings to those one loves and respects!"

"I thank you, Bion," leaning forward and placing one thin hand in his. "Mr. Elliston apparently had no such delicate scruples."

"He has been here? He has told you, then?"

"The bald facts. I could not ask him any questions, though he acted as though nothing would give him greater delight than to give me all the details. Ill news to some messengers seems like a feast of carrion to a crow!"

"Mother!" impulsively cried Lida, flushing and paling, tears of mingled pain and indignation springing into her eyes.

"Well, child?" languidly murmured the woman, leaning back in her chair, turning her lustrous eyes toward the trembling maiden. "What is it you wish?" she added, as Lida made no immediate response.

Bion Barnave coughed softly behind his hand, but it did not rise quickly enough to hide the birth of a malicious smile. Though he was so passionately in love with Lida Tredgold, that did not prevent him from feeling a certain pleasure in seeing her suffer, when that suffering came to her through the rival who had almost distanced him in the race for her hand.

Lida saw this smile, and it proved just what she needed most. Her usual self-control was restored, and she resumed her seat with quiet composure as she said:

"Nothing, mother, on second thoughts."

"If you were always as wise, child!" a little sharply retorted the invalid.

Then she turned once more to Bion Barnave asking him many eager questions about her husband and his experience in the county seat. He answered promptly and at length, but somehow, as she watched him coldly, Lida felt that he was holding something in reserve; that he was telling only part of the truth; and despite her intense dislike for him as a man and a lover, she felt her interest and curiosity growing with the passage of each minute.

It is not necessary to reproduce all the questions and answers. Enough has already been shadowed forth to answer the part which that arrest and imprisonment has to play in this story, at this stage.

Bion Barnave answered all questions, more or less at length, then gave the wife sundry messages which he declared Owen Tredgold had begged him to deliver. After this there was a little pause, during which he shifted uneasily in his chair, finally uttering in a hard, slightly strained voice:

"Your father sent one message to you in particular, Miss Lida, which I promised faithfully to deliver, when—"

"I am ready to receive it, Mr. Barnave," coldly interposed the maiden, as he perceptibly hesitated.

"If I might—it is a very pleasant evening outside!"

"Did father beg you to tell me that?"

"Lida! I'm ashamed of you!" sharply exclaimed Mrs. Tredgold, frowning as she detected that slightly malicious smile in her daughter's dark eyes. "Of course father did not send any such ridiculous message as that!"

"Then it sounded ridiculous to you, too?" innocently asked Lida.

Bion Barnave flushed hotly, his bloodshot eyes sparkling angrily. There was no longer hesitation in his tones as he spoke again:

"What I meant was to beg you to favor me with a brief interview in private, Miss Tredgold. Your mother is ill, and fatigued. If you will kindly step outside for a few moments, so—"

"I am very comfortable here, thank you, sir," with a cold bow. "My father would not send a message by you which my mother may not hear."

"I did not mean to convey that idea," frowned Barnave.

"Of course not—you are really growing too stupid for any use, child!" sharply cried the mother, frowning and nodding her head toward the maiden, then glancing out at the open door. "Put on your bonnet and go with Bion. Only a moment before he came you were wishing for a breath of fresh air. Go, my child, and no more nonsense!"

"I will not detain you long, Miss Tredgold," said Barnave, forcing his voice under better control. "What I have to say will come with a better grace if you and I are alone together. Will you come?"

"Of course she will come," interposed Mrs. Tredgold, rising from her chair and herself handing Lida a bonnet. "It will be a boon to me, as well. I am feeling tired. A little quiet will do me good. Go, now!"

Lida made no further resistance, but silently led the way out of the house, turning to the right and walking steadily along until at some little distance from the building, and where they were out of sight from the front door. Then she paused, turning and confronting the spy of the moonshiners coldly, her face pale and rigid as she said:

"You have had your wish, Mr. Barnave. We are alone together. If you really have a message from my father, deliver it in as few words as you possibly can."

"If?" echoed Barnave, frowning slightly as he attempted to take the hands of the maiden in his own, only to be baffled by a backward step.

"Do you think I would lie to you, Lida?"

"Would it be the first time?" was the swift retort. "But never mind answering that question, Bion Barnave. Your message, please?"

"Why are you so hard toward me, Lida? What has changed you so utterly? Time was when you could smile upon me, sweetly enough!"

"Time was when I believed you a true, honest, manly man; but that was long ago—say about the time this change of which you complain began in me, Bion Barnave," was the cold, cutting retort.

"Whoever said I was false to you, in word, thought or deed, lied in his throat, Lida!" passionately. "Tell me his name—but why do I ask that?" with a hard, vicious laugh.

"No one has been your accuser, save your own deeds and actions, Mr. Barnave," was the swift interposition. "No one has accused you of aught to me. I speak from my own knowledge."

"What have I done? What are my sins—against you?"

"You can answer those questions yourself, if you try. I prefer to say no more on that point. Once more, will you give me that message?"

"When you have told me in plain words why you have thrown me over for another, Lida. Stop!" with sudden passion, quickly stepping before her as she turned proudly away as though about to return to the house. "You shall hear me out, even though I have to hold you fast while I speak—while you explain my sins which you are punishing so heavily! Or," with a short, hard laugh as he suddenly released her arm, drawing back and leaving the path clear for her retreat. "If you prefer finishing the interview in the house, with your kind mother for a witness, so be it! Perhaps I would fare all the better thus!"

"You are playing a very rash and suicidal hand, Bion Barnave," the maiden said, facing him bravely, her brown eyes filled with mingled scorn and hatred. "If there had been even the ghost of a chance left for you, this brutal, insulting demeanor would certainly have blotted it out forever."

"So you think, but I know better, Lida," was the response, with enforced coolness. "I hold cards in reserve, the value of which you have little idea. Until they came my way I did fear my game was hopeless, as you seem to think still, but—"

"As I know, if you please," bowed Lida, with icy politeness.

"As you foolishly imagine, allow me to repeat," with a duplication of that bow. "But a truce to compliments, left-handed or otherwise. This is too serious a matter for such. I came here this evening to talk plainly and earnestly. I knew just about how you would receive me. I knew that you would sooner see the foul fiend himself."

"Yet you came, knowing this?" with mock surprise in voice and in arched brows.

"For a prize richly worth winning, remember."

"Don't crowd fate too hard, Bion Barnave. That prize may take the shape of a pistol-cartridge, and I carry no blanks," slowly, meaningly retorted Lida, one hand tapping her pocket as she spoke.

"My memory is not so short that I have forgotten last night, little fire-eater," laughed the spy, seemingly far more at ease now the conversation had taken this peculiar turn. "You did not see me flinch then, though I could see the prize you hint at down the muzzle of your revolver."

"Yet you did not use the rod you flourished so valiantly. Poor Uncle Jax," with sudden compassion in face and tones. "What had he done to deserve such brutal treatment? What was his sin that—"

"Uncle Jax don't count, just at this stage of the game, Lida, though he may come in before the deal is finished," with a short, hard laugh.

"You spoke falsely when you said he was leagued with those who sought to drag poor father to the gallows! Uncle Jax? I would a thousand times rather suspect *you* of such black treachery, Bion Barnave!"

The spy of the moonshiners laughed hardly, his black eyes glowing like living coals as he swiftly added:

"Why not make the declaration still more binding? Why not say that you would almost as soon suspect that immaculate gentleman, Glenn Elliston?"

"Possibly because I prefer to leave you a monopoly of lying."

"Stranger things than that have happened, little one," with a meaning in his tones that, despite herself, sent a cold chill creeping over the maiden and blanching her cheek. "I have hesitated to say all I might, because I love you still—love you even more wholly, more madly than I did even when you deigned to smile upon me—before that infernal scoundrel came back to this place!"

"You are alluding to Mr. Glenn Elliston, Bion Barnave?" coldly demanded Lida, facing him with eyes ablaze.

"Who else?" with a sullen scowl on his bruised face.

Before the words had passed his lips, the muzzle of a revolver was staring him fairly in the eyes. Over it Lida Tredgold glanced, her tone low and stern as she uttered distinctly:

"Eat those words, you cowardly cur! Take them back, or I'll save the gentleman the shame of soiling his hands with you!"

For a brief space Bion Barnave met her stern gaze fully. Long enough to see that she meant every word she uttered. Long enough to see that he had gone one step across the danger-line. Long enough to be convinced that the maiden meant shoot!

"Consider them eaten, then—until I can repeat them to *his* face, instead of yours, Miss Tredgold," he said slowly, a faint smile curling his thickened lips and revealing his teeth.

"That is equivalent to forever," with a contemptuous laugh, as she lowered her weapon, but still keeping it in her hand.

"Have it so if it pleases you best. Yet the time may not be so very far away when you may hear those same words, if no harder ones, uttered by lips which even you will hardly dare confront with a loaded pistol!"

"Once more, deliver the message you bring from my father. Unless you prefer admitting that you lied in claiming so much, rather than take the trouble or run the risk of forging a message."

"I told you no lie!" coldly. "I saw your father, just as I told your mother, and he gave me a message for your ear. He said nothing about my delivering it in private; that was my own idea. I fancied you would prefer to have no other ears listen. Your mother does not exactly adore Mr. Glenn Elliston, I believe."

"Leave that name out of the conversation, if you please, sir."

"Then the message must also be smothered, since it closely concerned that young gentleman."

"Now I *know* you are lying!" with sudden energy. "Glenn was with father only night before last, and if there had been anything to tell me concerning him, father would hardly have chosen you as his mouthpiece! *You*—whom he scorned and detested!"

"I whom he has learned to know better than he did, Miss Tredgold," with a low bow. "I was with Owen Tredgold last; Glenn Elliston had not been to visit him since his arrest."

"False! how dare you say so?" panted Lida angrily.

"On the authority of your father," was the swift retort. "He said Glenn Elliston had not been to see him. That he had wondered at this neglect at first, but not for long. Shall I tell you why, Miss Tredgold? Will you listen without burning powder?" with a low, mocking laugh.

"Not with him! Father said so!" murmured Lida, passing one hand across her brow as though to clear her bewildered brain.

"Your father said so, and of course I could not doubt his word. He told me that strange, almost incredible rumors had been floating to

his ears ever since his arrest, but that he had fought hard against giving them any credence. That he had been very slow to yield them his belief, but that at last he could doubt them no longer.

"He bade me hasten to you, and bid you beware how you trusted too far in Glenn Elliston, for—"

"Stop!" cried Lida, flushing with anger, her lithe figure drawn proudly erect, her empty hand shaking before the bruised face of the moonshiner spy. "You have said enough—too much!"

"And yet I have only hinted at a portion of the infamous truth!" bowed Barnave, willfully mistaking her meaning. "When you learn all I can tell you your horror will be intensified to that degree—"

He stopped short as Lida drew back, her demeanor entirely changing. Her passionate anger seemed to vanish as if by magic. Her face resumed its wonted color, and a smile came upon her lips.

"Why do you stop?" she asked, softly, her red lips curling with just the suspicion of a sneer. "I am so much interested! I beg of you to finish—once for all!"

Shrewd and clear-witted though he was under ordinary circumstances, Bion Barnave was thoroughly at sea just now. Perhaps it was the strength of his insane passion that helped to blind him, but he at once jumped to a conclusion that sent the hot blood leaping madly to his brain, making him fairly reel with its pressure. Only for an instant. Then, rallying, he hoarsely uttered:

"Lida—have I been such a blind fool? Is it all a mistake, my thinking you flung me over for Glenn Elliston? You do not love him?"

Still smiling, still calm and amused to all outward seeming, the maiden quietly responded:

"You have been, as you still are, a fool. It is a mistake about my flinging you over for another, since I never took you up. That is where your folly showed itself the most plainly. As for Glenn Elliston, I do love him—better than life, a thousand-fold!"

"You say this—to me!" with a hoarse, choking gulp.

"I thought you asked me for information?" with a gentle surprise in her soft tones, and a faint mockery showing in her lustrous eyes.

With an effort Bion Barnave recovered himself. It showed for itself how difficult the act was, but he succeeded better than might have been expected, under the peculiar circumstances.

"And you mean to marry him, I suppose?"

"I do. I shall marry him. And the day that sees me the wife of Glenn Elliston, will be the proudest, happiest of all my life!"

Slowly, almost dreamily Lida uttered these words, her brown eyes half-closing, a smile playing about her red lips.

"That day will never come in this world!" sharply retorted Barnave.

"You surely are not threatening me, dear sir?"

"I am simply speaking the plain, naked truth," all passion vanishing from his voice as he spoke. "I am telling you what will, as well as what will never come to pass."

"You say you love Glenn Elliston. You will see the day, and that right speedily, when you will declare you hate him worse than the foul fiend hates holy water. You say you will marry him; that will never come to pass. If it should, unluckily, you would curse the day as the blackest, bitterest, most unfortunate day the sun ever shone upon!"

"Is that all?" with languid interest.

"Nor half!" with sudden vehemence, his black eyes turning almost red with the fire that filled them. "Listen, Lida Tredgold! And mark well what I am saying!"

"Glenn Elliston is a devil of treachery and wickedness! He came here a traitor, with his hands red in the life-blood of his neighbors! He came here to gain gold by wringing the hearts of those who never harmed him—who took him into their homes and hearts as a gentleman and a friend!"

"What is he? A paid spy on the poor, starving wretches who try to drive the wolf from their door by the same means as their fathers, before these accursed revenue laws were enacted and put in force! He is hired by the gold of the revenue sharks! He is a Secret Service spy, and he it is who sends information to the bloodhounds of the law—information gained by lying and fawning and spying on those who freely give him of their best!"

The languid smile faded out from that fair face, and Lida Tredgold cast off her affected amusement. The color concentrated in her cheeks, glowing like twin roses of scarlet. Her eyes began to sparkle, her lithe figure to draw proudly erect as these swift charges rolled over the bruised lips of the moonshiner spy.

"Have you said your last, Bion Barnave?" she demanded, as he paused to catch his breath and dampen his dry lips—"are you through?"

"Not yet," with a hard, harsh laugh that showed how thoroughly reckless his mad passion had left him. "The picture is not quite complete, but a few more strokes will put it in

order for exhibition. And thus I give them—listen well, little one!"

"Glenn Elliston is doing all he can to fit a noose about the throat of your father! He it is who made the first stir in this murder case which, only for him, might never have been revived until the crack of doom. And Glenn Elliston with his own hand penned the charge on which Owen Tredgold was arrested for that murder!"

With a movement swift as light, Lida Tredgold leaned forward, then back. But across those bruised lips her hand had fallen heavily.

"Liar! calumniator! I would shoot you like the cur you have this day proved yourself, only Glenn Elliston may wish to make you eat your perjury in public! I leave you for *him* to deal with—coward!"

"You strike my lips now, little one, but the time is near when you will be only too glad to wipe that blow away with a kiss!" vowed Bion Barnave, smiling grimly. "Until then, *adieu!*" and he turned on his heel, striding rapidly away, never once turning his head to look back.

CHAPTER IX.

A TOO POTENT INCANTATION.

WITH those last words the veil of steam drew together, shutting out the ghastly face from view of those on the opposite side. And as though a spell had been suddenly lifted from him, the rigid muscles of Uncle Ajax relaxed, and with a gasping, choking moan, he fell in a seemingly lifeless heap at the feet of Cunjur King Saul.

"De spell a-wu'kin'—open he lips *now*, I reckon! Tell ebery'ting want a fin' out—*you!*" chuckled the hoodoo doctor, with a swift glance toward the space where the phantom face had been—had been, but now was not.

The dense cloud of steam was growing thinner, spreading out more widely, broken here and there by rifts and irregular openings through which the rough rear wall of the hut showed clearly. Had there been anything else, human or ghostly, it must have been visible then; but there was nothing of the sort.

Evidently Cunjur King Saul was prepared for this. It was hardly to be expected that he, a dealer in the black art, as it were, would be as sensitive on these points as his generally superstitious race. And as he stooped over the prostrate figure of Uncle Jax, he grinned and nodded and chuckled grimly as his glittering eyes pierced the steam veil.

With strong, nimble movements Cunjur King Saul straightened out the upper portion of the fallen negro, so that his breathing would not be obstructed, then he sprang across the hut and darted back with a small flask filled with some dark, strong-scented liquid.

"Open you' lips, Unc' Jax!" he chuckled, as he gently lifted the head of his patient on one arm, trying to insinuate the top of the flask into the old man's mouth. "Tek des a wee, singly drap, Unc' Jax! Good fo' you, honey—pow'ful good fo' you, now I tell you good an' hard! Des a wee drap, fo' fotch back dem stray wits ob you's, honey!"

Soft and plausible enough the words and tone, but there was an evil, malicious glow in the eyes of the hoodoo doctor as he gloated over his victim. A glow that deepened and turned to hot anger as the rigidly-locked jaws refused to open or the tense lips to receive even the single drop he spoke so insinuatingly of.

A black scowl came over his face as he saw this, and then he resorted to a greater degree of force—until a spasmodic movement on the part of Uncle Jax almost knocked the flask with its precious contents out of his hand. In his haste to save the potion, Cunjur King Saul dropped the head of his patient, it striking the ground-floor with a distinct thud.

This seemed all that was needed to restore Uncle Jax to consciousness, for when the hoodoo doctor turned again, the old man was lifting his head, his eyes staring wildly about him in quest of that fearful phantom head.

"Glory to de saints, Unc' Jax, fo' see you come back to dis yere worl' once more!" ejaculated Cunjur King Saul, the scowl vanishing from his yellow face as by magic, a smile that was at the same time wheedling and commanding, taking its place. "Tek des a lilly drap o' dis 'lixir, Unc' Jax, an' you fo'git all dat you see an' heah des now! Open you' mouf an' tek it, boy! What you skeered ob? Fink I tek trouble to p'izen ole niggah like you? Huh!"

But Uncle Jax firmly and doggedly pushed the proffered flask to one side as he managed to regain his feet unaided. He staggered, dropping heavily into the chair, to save himself from falling at length. He tried twice to speak, without succeeding. But when he did manage to articulate, there was no chance for doubt.

"Nebber see nuffin'. Nebber hear nuffin'. Don' want no drug-stuff."

Cunjur King Saul stood gazing fixedly into the ashy-hued face of his patient, his little eyes glowing redly, his thin lips quivering strangely. And Uncle Jax met that gaze without flinching. Weak though his body might be, his brain was clear and steady now.

"You didn't see nuffin', Uncle Jax?" slowly demanded the hoodoo doctor, throwing all his power into his blazing orbs, leaning a little nearer his patient, as though to add to his gaze the weight of his own personal magnetism.

"Nebber see nuffin', sah," was the slow, distinct response.

"Who own dat face, Unc' Jax? Who own dat voice? Who say dar bin bittah, brack murder done 'fore dat head come 'part i'um de body it once hitch onto by libbin' flesh an' bone? Wha' fo' you keel obah lak fat hog what knuck in head wid ax, ef you don' see nor heah nuffin'? Wha' mek all dat bobbery, Unc' Jax—huh?"

Uncle Jax never wavered for an instant. He met that fiery gaze without flinching, the only alteration being in his gradually contracting pupils. Smaller and smaller they grew, until it seemed as though they would disappear entirely.

As Cunjur King Saul paused with that sharp interrogative ejaculation, Uncle Jax gave a little start, something like a smile coming into his face as he echoed:

"Huh! was dat it? I see de pictur' you hang on de wall—you done tuck it down, sah!"

If acting, Uncle Jax showed himself an adroit one. He stared at the rear wall, rubbing his eyes vigorously to stare again, then gazing in perplexity at the hoodoo doctor.

"It come an' it go, but my han's nebber tetch it, boy! I say de propah spell fo' bring up face ob one who cunjur you, an' dat head mek its 'pearance des lak you see. Hope you ain't done fo'git what I tol' you fu'st han', Unc' Jax! Hope you ain't fo'git I 'knowledge 'forehan' dat I ain't got no powah to ondo a cunjur spell what mixed up wid a corpse! Look mighty dub'ous, Unc' Jax—pow'ful dub'ous, now I tell you good an' airnes', honey!" with a slow and regretful shake of his feather-crested head, his snaky eyes all the time keenly scrutinizing the curiously blanched face of his visitor.

Uncle Jax shivered in every fiber, but managed to mutter:

"Mus' be mistake, sah! Nebber gib no 'casion fo' sech cunjur-spell lak dat. Nebber do dat face no harm—'deed no!"

"Who dat face, Unc' Jax? How dat man git kill? What name come fum dat dead lip when he 'peak to you?"

"Nebber heah no name. Don't know nuffin' what you ax, sah," slowly, doggedly muttered Uncle Jax, shaking his head, his hands tightly clinched together, every member betraying the intense strain which he was undergoing.

Cunjur King Saul laughed harshly, almost threateningly, as he stood with folded arms before his visitor.

"All yight, Unc' Jax! It tek mebbe little longah, be little mo' trouble, mebbe, but it come to same fing in de eend. You come heah fo' ax me tek cunjur-spell off. I tek de job. Dat settle it. Can't go back dis late in de day! Dat fetch bad luck fo' one long yeah an' a day—mek eberyfing go crooked what I lay dis yere han' to. Got to fin' out des who dis yer' face is, an' des why he put spell on you' back!"

"Nebber min'—"

"Got to min', boy!" was the cold position. "Too late fo' git skeered out now. 'Tain't you dat interested 'lone, but Cunjur King Saul too. Bre'k he luck all up ef he turn back when he once put he han' to de wu'k. Got to go on to de eend, ef it kill you ten times obah, boy!"

Uncle Jax shivered anew, stealing a covert glance in the direction of the closed door, as though calculating the chances for and against a headlong dash for freedom. Cunjur King Saul laughed harshly as he intercepted this glance.

"De doah fas' locked, Unc' Jax; spook-fingahs hol' it mighty tight, now I tell you *hard*! You longin' fo' kick de bucket, all you need is mek break fo' dat do' an' tetch it 'fore Cunjur King Saul sign dem spook-fingahs let go dar grip! Dat's all, Unc' Jax. Fink King Saul lie, des go on sperementin' lak dat—des go on, honey!"

With fingers quite as nimble as his tongue, the hoodoo doctor was busied with the contents of a box which he dragged out from under the low cot. While uttering these warnings, he was winding bits of rags and strings of gay colors about a rudely carved wooden doll, evidently of home manufacture.

When this idol was decked out to his satisfaction, he held it up before Uncle Jax, paying no attention to the shivering fit which came back with renewed vigor.

"Kiss de fetich, niggah!" he muttered, gravely, with a swift motion causing the image to touch the blanched lips of the frightened old man. "Dar! dat bin' you bofe to tell de plain, squar' trufe! One ob you lie now, an' ebahlast-in' flames eat you up ten time a minnit fum now ontwel de angel Gab'r'el blow de las' ho'n!"

He stepped briskly back, drawing the little table with him, until the width of the room separated him from Uncle Jax. He placed the wooden fetich on the table before him, kneeling on the further side, facing his awed, trembling client. And holding the fetich between both hands, he bowed his head until his forehead touched the table, mumbling rapidly in an unknown tongue—or such it seemed.

After a few moments thus occupied, Cunjur

King Saul lifted his head and spoke to the wooden fetich:

"In de name ob de great an' all-pow'ful Obeah, I command you speak! What name dat dead face hab when it libbin'?"

Silence. Uncle Jax held his breath until it seemed as though he must suffocate. Cunjur King Saul turned from grave to anxious, his eyes dilating wildly, the veins swelling and standing out on his temples.

"What name—who done kill you, den?" the hoodoo doctor hoarsely uttered, changing his form of questioning.

As before, not a word not a sound. Evidently there was something lacking in the spell, or his boasted power had for once failed him when called upon.

A full minute thus, then Cunjur King Saul rose to his feet and tossed the gayly decked out fetich back into its box, with a strange lack of reverence, snarling viciously at Uncle Jax, who was unable to wholly restrain the long sigh of intense relief that came from his oppressed lungs.

"You snicker, fool niggah!" the hoodoo doctor snarled, angrily, his slender figure drawn up to its full height, his yellow fingers shaking menacingly before the old man's face. "You fink it only fun? Huh!" he added, with a harsh, disagreeable laugh as he partially regained his composure. "Laugh while you in, niggah. Mo' lak you cry when you know what all dat 'fusal to talk means!"

"'Deed, sah, it on'y tickle in froat," humbly muttered Uncle Jax, with a deprecating clearing of that offending organ. "'Deed, I nebber firk ob laughin'. Don't feel dat way, nohow, sah."

No one who saw him then could have doubted for an instant the perfect truth of this last assertion. Poor Uncle Jax! Of all he had endured of recent days, this ordeal was proving the most trying by far.

"Lucky fo' you, boy," gravely uttered the hoodoo doctor, shaking his head after a fashion that by no means added to the comfort of his client. "Bad business—pow'ful bad business, anyhow, 'dout mekin' it mo' wuss by laughin' an' scoffin', an' all sech 'dicolous truck. Hope you gwine to come frough it all yight, Unc' Jax, but it look mighty dub'ous—'deed it do, now!"

"'Deed so!" groaned the poor dupe, furtively wiping the drops of cold sweat from his brow.

"I gwine do all I kin fo' you, Unc' Jax, but I done tol' you fu'st off dat I ain't got no powah fo' cure cunjur-wu'k wid a corpse in it. Dat de wu'st ob all cunjurin', tek it in a lump; an' de toughest sort ob dat kin' comes 'long ob a corpse dat didn't die 'cordin' to law an' natur'."

"I see dat face, but it strange; nebber seen it in life dat I kin call to min'. I know it speak wid you, Unc' Jax, but what it say, dat wasn't fo' me to hear. Nebber heah nuffin' when in a spell lak dat."

"Spell on me, too," eagerly muttered the old man, his eyes filling with that strange devoted light once more. "I nebber heah no talk!"

"I ain't axin' you what you heah, Unc' Jax," coldly retorted Cunjur King Saul. "It nuffin' to me; when de fetich hold tongue 'bout it, dat eend my intrust in de mattah, so fur. All I know is what my eye tell me. Dat plain 'nough corpse-wu'k, an' a corpse what b'in killed an' frowed in de watah by somebody. Ef it you, Unc' Jax, dar nuffin' sabe you or bre'k de spell dat on you now. Ef *not* you—ef de corpse mek mistake an' cunjur you fo' nuddah pusson, say—den dar des one chance fo' you comin' out all yight in de eend."

Uncle Jax said nothing, though it was plain enough that Cunjur King Saul paused for that express purpose. If he was disappointed, the hoodoo doctor made no sign, but added gravely:

"Dat one hope lay yight heah, Unc' Jax: de findin' an' punishin' ob de real killer ob dat corpse! When *dat* come to pass, you uncunjured yight away, an' de corpse nebbah trouble you mo'."

"I tell you I cain't lif' dat spell, but I kin put nudder spell so it stan' twixt you'n de corpse. I kin mek cunjur 'troug 'nough so dat corpse cain't do no wuss dan pester you like; 'troug enough so he cain't cross obah it to kill nuh harm you in de body. What you say, Unc' Jax? You want dat sort ob spell stan' up between you? You want dat kin' ob charm?"

Uncle Jax hesitated for a moment, then huskily uttered:

"What mek one mistake, make 'nudder! He put cunjur on me, what nebber harmed him in life! How he know when time comes to tek dat spell off ag'in? How he know when yight man punish fo' killin' him?"

"De law settle dat, Unc' Jax," with a frown of impatience. "When a man pull hemp fo' dat murdah, den de ghost laid fo' good an' all! 'Way de ghost go, lak a puff ob smoke in de win', an' nebbah stop fo' ax is it de one he put cunjur onto. Dat ghost law, Unc' Jax!"

"Den I want de charn, an' I want it mighty bad, sah!" excitedly cried the old negro, springing to his feet, but dropping back into his chair as the great hoodoo doctor frowned blackly upon him.

"No sech mighty rush, boy," he rumbled, sternly. "Charms lak you need dis time, ain't made in sech a monst'ous hurry. Tek's time, boy; time'an' finkin' an' heaps o' 'sperience!"

"Ax pardon, sah, but I was so bad 'cited dat I didn't stop to fink how to act propah, sah," murmured Uncle Jax, apologetically.

Cunjur King Saul paid no attention to this remark. He was striding slowly back and forth, one yellow hand caressing his pointed chin, his eyes turned in their sockets until nothing but "the whites" were to be seen by the awe-stricken negro who watched him, scarcely daring to draw a full breath.

"It mighty hard, but it kin be did—it kin be did!" muttered the conjurer, frowning darkly. "De little fingah ob a boy what died in a fit! De fang ob a moccasin! A lock ob ha'r fum—"

His voice died away in a low, inarticulate murmur that lasted for some little time. Then Cunjur King Saul came out of this fit of meditation, and briskly moved here and there, diving into boxes, rummaging in pots and pans and other utensils, but keeping what he selected most religiously from the wondering, awe-stricken gaze of Uncle Jax.

"Shet dem owleyes ob yours, niggah, you bettah!" he muttered, with a portentous frown and shake of the head. "You try to see too much, you resk gittin' so you nebbah see no mo', now I tell you *good*!"

That was enough. Uncle Jax closed his eyes so tightly that his face was wrinkled as a frosted crabapple, and thus he remained until Cunjur King Saul again addressed him:

"Look up, Unc' Jax, an' pay mighty 'ticklar 'tention to what I say. Fu'st, you know whar dey is cross-roads?"

Uncle Jax nodded vigorously.

"Dat good, so fur," with a nod of approval, as his right hand selected a particular package from the number resting in his curved left palm. "You tek' dis yer' charm—de one wropped in red, b'ar in min', now, fo' ef you mek' mistake it all go fo' nuffin', ef still wuss don' come to pass. You tek' dis yer' charm, an' go to de cross-roads to-night, as nigh come twelve by de watch as you kin hit it. You mark out a roun' ring yight whar de middle ob dem roads cross, git on you' knees an' say a pra'r—any one 'll do, des so it comes mighty airnest, Unc' Jax: it got to be mighty airnest, to do de wu'k, now I tell you *hard*!"

"You say dat pra'r, den you dig a hole in shape ob a star. You put dis yer' charm in dat hole, de big eend p'intin' norf, an' de lilly eend p'intin' souf. You kibber it up wid you' *lef* han', an' pat it down hard an' smooove wid you' *right* han'. You do dis, den you shet you' eyes an' count des as long as yo' kin hol' yo' breff 'dout bu'stin' wide open at de lungs."

"Is dat all?" quavered Uncle Jax, as Cunjur King Saul paused.

"Dat's all you need do, de charm wu'k all de rest. Dat ghost nebbah kin reach you 'long eider ob dem roads. When he come to dat charm planted dar, he des boun' to fade an' melt 'way to nuffin'."

"But dar's heap odder roads dat—"

"Ain't dar mo' charms heah, too?" sharply interposed the hoodoo doctor, frowning. "Wait ontwell I git done, cain't yo', boy?"

"Beg pardon, sah—'deed I does, sah!" muttered Uncle Jax, shrinking timidly back once more.

"I ain't fool, don't reckon. Knows des how many roads leads to de Big House whar yo' put on so much style, Unc' Jax! You count, an' you see dar's a charm fo' each an' ebi ery one ob dem roads. Dey ain't so big, but dey on'y hab fo' do quarter so much wu'k, don' you see? You plant one ob dem in each road—it den mek' much matah des whar, nur des when you does it, Unc' Jax, so you does plant 'em 'fo' de moon changes. Night er day, it all de same fo' dem, but de udder charm heap mo' 'ticklar, you un'-stan'?"

"I be berry keeful, sah," eagerly muttered the old man.

"To-night, mind, and nigh de stroke ob twelve as you kin hit it," repeated Cunjur King Saul, as he passed the charms over to Uncle Jax.

With trembling fingers the old negro stowed them away about his person, then produced a leather pocketbook, which he unstrapped, showing a number of bank-notes within as he handed it in silence to the hoodoo doctor.

The eyes of Cunjur King Saul glittered avaciously, though they were quickly veiled by his lids. He selected two of the bills, crumpling them up in his hand with admiral-like assumed indifference, as he added:

"Dat all, Unc' Jax. You got yo' moneys wuff, ef ebbah mortal man did git it! Seah to do de wu'k, ef yo' don' mek no bad mistakes in plantin' de charms. Keep de ghost off, saah. An' den, when a man hang by de neck fo' dat murdah, you nebber see anyfing mo' ob dat spook! Cunjur King Saul tell you so, Unc' Jax, an' he don' know how to lie!"

Uncle Jax was mumbling his thanks as best he could, which was but poorly, his gratitude and relief was so intense. How intense, no one can even faintly imagine, unless strongly tinged

with the same superstition that held him under its baneful spell.

Cunjur King Saul cut his thanks short, literally bowing him out of the hut, closing the door behind him with scant ceremony.

Not a little to his amazement and dismay, Uncle Jax found that the day was gone, and night upon the world. He could scarcely realize that so much time had been consumed within the hut of the conjurer.

He hurried along the obscure path, with many a frightened glance over his shoulder, lest he should catch a glimpse of that frightful head and face summoned up by the magic power of the hoodoo doctor. What if it was lying in wait, resolved to work its dread will before those powerful charms could be planted to circumscribe its powers?

So frightful was this idea, that Uncle Jax soon broke into a trot that quickly became a mad, breathless race with the phantoms his distorted imagination conjured up from the shadows. And only when he drew near the Big House did his pace slacken.

As recorded on a prior occasion, just so did Uncle Jax act on this one, showing the same peculiar precautions on entering the Big House, going through precisely the same maneuvers, even to descending through the trap-door in the kitchen.

And when he lit the candle in the room which he occupied at night, there was the same laggard, worn, grieved expression on his face, and hot tears rolling down his wrinkled cheeks. He knelt beside his cot, bowing his head in prayer. Not for himself, it seemed. For the time being his wild superstitions were forgotten.

But as time passed on, and the clear, musical strokes of a clock rung out the hour of eleven, Uncle Jax started to his feet with sudden trembling. The haunted look came back to his eyes as he glanced tremblingly about the dimly-lighted room, like one who expects to behold a dread visitor.

There was naught to alarm him, however. He was alone. There was not a sound in the house, now that those warning strokes had died away.

"It mus' be did!" Uncle Jax muttered, desperately nerving himself. "De time come mighty nigh 'g'inst I git dar! I got to go!"

Still it was difficult work, and took some little time to muster up his courage. And as he finally emerged from the front door, Uncle Jax glared about him with wide eyes, holding his breath and shivering with dread in every fiber.

His strange experience at the hut of the hoodoo doctor had deepened his superstition, too strong before. What he saw there had still more completely shattered his nerves, and Uncle Jax suffered positive torture with each step he took that night.

Still, as he said, it must be gone through with, if he hoped for relief, even partial. If he could keep that horrible ghost from coming to the house, by barring every road leading to it, he could confine himself more closely until—

Uncle Jax shivered and groaned audibly as before his eyes rose the vision of a man hanging from a gallows, by the neck—a man with the face of Owen Tredgold. A face horribly distorted now, but—the face of a man who died for the crime of another!

"It's de law!" he muttered, trying to banish that frightful vision as he hurried along toward the cross-roads. "I can't do nuffin' to hender de law—a pore, mis'able nigger like me!"

Not until the cross-roads came in sight did the vision leave him, but it was only exchanging one torture for another. What if the ghost should make its appearance before he could complete that long ceremony as enjoined by Cunjur King Saul?

Uncle Jax had to pause for a few seconds before he could recall the precise manner of proceeding. A devout believer, he dared not take a step until fully satisfied that he was right. A single mistake would ruin all—would destroy the efficacy of the charm, even if it did not bring still worse consequences upon his head.

That reflection lent him the necessary clearness of brain, and Uncle Jax set to work precisely as Cunjur King Saul had directed. With two sticks and a string, he marked out a perfect circle precisely in the center of the crossing. With closed eyes and bowed head, he sunk upon his knees and whispered a prayer; not over long, be sure, but fervent and earnest enough to make ample amends for its briefness.

With his knife he carved a rude star in the hard-beaten earth, carefully preserving these outlines as he dug down and scraped out the loosened dirt. Into this he placed the charm, the largest end pointing due north, then covering it up precisely after the manner detailed with so many precautions.

At times Uncle Jax paused to reflect, to recall his instructions, but he made not the slightest error. The charm was duly covered over, and all traces of its presence removed. Then, still upon his knees, with tightly-closed eyes, he drew a long breath and began counting mentally.

As long as human endurance could serve, then, with a gasp, his lips and eyes opened—to behold a vision that caused him to forget his exhausted lungs!

A tall, phantom-like figure stood before him, close wrapped in a military cloak, falling in folds to its knees. The clear moonlight fell across the face—a face white and ghastly—the same face which had met his terrified gaze through the steam wreath in King Saul's hut—the face of Pandy Rowell, the murdered revenue detective!

And as its white hands flung open the cloak, one finger pointing to its breast, a dim, ghostly circle of light spread about the dark-red blotch which told of a life let out by murderous means.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER KNOT IN THE SKEIN.

GLENN ELLISTON lived in a small valley several miles from the Tredgold place, this little remnant of a competency being, for its size, by far the most valuable and productive bit of property in that part of the country. The soil and exposure were admirably fitted for raising small fruits and vegetables, but without a convenient market, this became more of a drawback than an advantage. As Owen Tredgold ruefully said, when giving his cordial consent to the ardent love plea which Elliston entered before him:

"It's hardly big enough fer one, an'll make powerful tight squeezin' fer two; so fur from a decent market. Ef you could manage to move the place nigher to a market, or fetch a market nigh enough fer runnin' in garden sass onto 'em, you'd be snug as pigs in clover, you two!"

Elliston was not utterly without money when he came back to settle down, it seemed. He hired one stout man who kept the place in order while his young employer was away, which comprised the larger portion of the time, recently.

Glenn was absent on this late afternoon, when a small company of men, headed by John Mahar in person, rode up to the blocks before the neat little cottage.

"I can't see nothin' of him nowhars," the gaunt moonshiner muttered, just before reaching the spot. "Ef I didn't feel mighty dubious 'bout the story comin' so straight an' bein' true, I'd e'ena most take it he'd smelt a mouse an' skipped out jest in time!"

The men who accompanied him, interchanged glances of doubt, some seeming to at once take the worst view of the matter, while a lesser number appeared ill at ease from an entirely different reason.

Without alighting from his horse at the blocks placed for that purpose, John Mahar lifted his voice in a stentorian hallo! that quickly brought a similar answer.

"That's Lafe Dawson," he muttered, in an aside to his allies. "Ef he tries to break away, run him down ef it kills a hoss! We got to git at the bottom facts now, sense we've tuck it in han'!"

There was time for no more elaborate instructions, as the hired man left in charge, just then made his appearance from one of the outbuildings, grinning broadly as he recognized the horsemen.

He gave no signs of uneasiness or of taking to his heels. Instead, he hurriedly advanced, welcome beaming in every feature of his broad, heavy countenance. It was a lonely spot, after all, and man is a gregarious animal; little wonder, then, that he should welcome this unexpected opening for a social chat.

"Evenin', gents!" he cried, as he approached. "Won't you 'light down an' stop a spell? Won't say swap lies, fer it's mighty little news that comes from my side o' the fence, an' I hain't bin—hey?"

"Whar's Elliston?" repeated John Mahar, just a little suspicious of this unusually warm welcome. "Ax him to step out, won't you? Got a little business to talk over with him, sence it comes so handy."

Lafe Dawson grinned more broadly than ever as he responded:

"That's my good news, then, come a'ready! 'Light an' hitch. The boss ain't here, jest now, but—"

"Whar is he?" bluntly interposed Mahar, frowning.

"Guessin' don't count, or mebbe I mought git pritty nigh the mark an' never try once more," laughed the numerous fellow, with a knowing wink. "Tuck nigh a hour to dress, an' when he rid off, both shoes was shiny enough to see to shave in!"

John Mahar alighted from his horse and passed over the stepping-blocks while the fellow was talking. And then—the ugly muzzle of a business-like revolver was thrust fairly into Lafe Dawson's face.

"Take it easy, my man, ef you don't want the hull top story loosened too bad fer mendin'," curtly muttered Mahar, his face hard-set and most discouraging to one who would like to look at the affair as a playful, if clumsy jest.

Before Dawson could answer, the rest of the party were leaping into the yard, and surrounding him. He was no fool, whatever else he might be, and sullenly resigned himself to his fate.

"I don't know what I've done, John Mahar, to deserre this, but I knuckle without a kick. Putt up your gun, fer it ain't needed this time."

"Whar's young Elliston? Talk straight, Dawson! Ef you're ketched in a lie, it'll go mighty hard with ye!"

"Gone to see his gal, I reckon," was the sullen response. "He rid off that way, an' was dressed in his finest. Ef he ain't thar, I don't know no more'n the man in the moon whar to look fer him."

"You've got your warnin', an' ef it turns out you're lyin', so much the wuss fer you, Lafe," coldly uttered John Mahar, putting up his pistol, but keeping a firm grip on the fellow's shoulder with his other hand.

"What fer would I lie?"

"You won't ef you valie your hide, my fine fellow!"

"I ain't no call to, I don't reckon," muttered Dawson, yielding to the strong impulse of that arm and moving toward the house. "Ef the boss hes bin doin' anythin' crooked, kin I help it? Do I look like a man as'd resk his neck to lie Elliston out of a box?"

"Shet them teeth down on that clapper, an' hold 'em thar tight ontel you're axed to chirp, Lafe Dawson," growled the gaunt mountaineer, then turning his head and hastily adding: "A couple o' you stow them critters away whar they won't show up too big. The rest scatter an' take a look over the place. Mebbe Elliston is some's 'round, fer all this critter talks so mighty free. Ef he breaks kiver, ketch him! Don't do him any hurt ef you kin git along without it. He ain't proved guilty yit, mind ye!"

"It looks mighty like that's what's got to come though!" frowned blunt Mark Tappan.

"I'd heap ruther resk a dollar that this squirmy critter's at the bottom of it," with a scowl at the sullen face of his captive. "I'm thinkin' it'll turn out a putt-up job. Ef it does—waal, Lafe," and his sinewy fingers closed on the farmhand's shoulder with significant emphasis, "you'll run up a tree without usin' your han's to hyste yer body—an' that's swore to."

Lafe Dawson looked very much as though he would like to make a retort of some description to this grim threat, but evidently concluded that discretion was the better policy for him to follow under the present circumstances. His florid face blanched a little, and the shaggy brows drew down over his eyes as they glanced furtively from side to side.

He saw the moonshiners scattering as directed, searching the out-buildings, and looking in the stables to see if Elliston's favorite saddle-horse was there. Two men were taking the horses into the yard where they could be stabled, yet be handy in case of an emergency.

"You couldn't make it ef you was to try, Dawson," dryly observed his captor, seeming to read the fellow's thoughts by some magnetism in that contact with his shoulder. "You ain't built jest right to outrun a bullet, an' you make too broad a mark for an old soldier to miss easy. No, I don't reckon I'd try it on!"

He pushed his captive inside the cottage before him, standing by his side in grim silence until the moonshiners came hurrying up. No need to ask for their report. They came empty-handed, and there had been no sound of a struggle or of firing.

"His hoss is missin'," volunteered Mark Tappan. "Reckon he's tuk a ride, but whether it's fer sparkin' or savin' his neck, I'll never tell ye!"

"Mebbe we kin find out from our good fri'nd here," quietly commented John Mahar, as he placed a chair near the table and motioned for Lafe Dawson to occupy it.

"I done told you all I know 'bout it," sullenly muttered the fellow, furtively scanning the faces of the men by whom he was surrounded. "Elliston rid away jest after dinner time, an' I hain't see'd nothin' of him sence. He never said whar he was goin', nur I wasn't durn fool enough fer to ax him when he 'lowed to git through his business."

"We'll let that drap, then," coldly uttered Mahar, drawing a chair opposite the fellow, bending across the table and gazing keenly into his eyes as he added: "How much you git paid fer sellin' us out, Lafe Dawson?"

"Sell who—I ain't bin sellin' nobody out!" exploded the prisoner, with a startled glance into those stern eyes opposite him.

Those who watched him closely—and this comprised about all of the party—fancied they saw him change color and lose a portion of his dogged self-possession as John Mahar abruptly asked that sharp question. He seemed conscious of this fact himself, and plainly strove to cover it over by his assumption of puzzled surprise.

"It's a mighty bad habit, an' one I'm sorry to see is growin' on you turribly, Lafe," coldly uttered John Mahar, leaning back in his chair and placing a cocked revolver on the table before him, the muzzle turned so as to cover the hired man. "You're gittin' to be sech a slave to lyin', that one of 'em slips out afore the truth kin git even hafe a chance to born itself. A monstrous bad habit, an' one that'll check your growth in a heap hurry, ef you don't mend it, Dawson."

"It's easy to call a man a liar with him kivered an' sech a gang o' backers all 'round ye!" sullenly muttered the fellow, his bull-dog jaws squaring pugnaciously.

"An' jest as easy to prove him a liar, why don't you say?" half-laughed the gaunt mountaineer.

"Did you hev to fetch sech a crowd along jest to hear you say this? It ain't like you, Mahar, to kick a man that's down. I cain't fight the hull kit-an'-boodle. You know that! Then—ain't it rather low-down fer you to fling the lie in my face, when you know I cain't take it up?"

John Mahar flushed a trifle, for this cold speech cut him deeply. But he had planned out his course, and it was too late to alter it at this stage of the game.

"Then you're ready to take oath that you hain't bin sellin' our secrets to the revenue sharks, Lafe Dawson? You'll kiss the book an' swear you don't even know how they come by the knowledge they've used ag'in' us so mighty heavy?"

Slowly, distinctly the gaunt mountaineer pronounced these words, and a faint murmur ran through the lookers-on as they noted the gradual drooping of the prisoner's eyes, bold, angry and defiant at first, but growing troubled and uneasy as Mahar pinned him down closely.

Dawson tried to speak, but something working in his throat seemed to choke him and hold back the words. He cleared his throat hoarsely, and gave a toss of his shaggy head that was intended for reckless defiance; but for all that, his eyes failed to meet the steady gaze of his inquisitor, shifting uneasily, more like one guilty than innocent.

"I kin sw'ar I never sold no sech news to nobody!" he muttered.

"Kin you sw'ar you don't know who did do the sellin' then?" Mark Tappan sharply interposed.

John Mahar frowned darkly, moodily, as he saw how hard this query struck home. Lafe Dawson shrunk before it, his eyes glancing swiftly around as though in quest of a loophole through which he might escape.

It was an ugly, disagreeable affair at the best, and one into which he had entered with positive reluctance.

Past events plainly proved the existence of a traitor in their midst. Some one who was thoroughly acquainted with the moonshiners' secrets had given the revenue detectives information on which they had acted with disastrous results to the natives. Stills were raided and machinery destroyed, which all felt confident could never have been unearthed save through treachery.

Nor was this the worst. On more than one occasion, resistance had been made, and blood shed freely. The moonshiners believed that the right was on their side, whatever these new-fangled laws might say, and doggedly fought for those rights and their property. Some of them even unto death. And those deaths lay at the door of the secret spy and treacherous informer who sold their secrets to the revenue men.

With others, John Mahar had taken solemn oath to spare no pains in discovering who this secret spy was; and when that discovery should be made he had sworn to never know rest until full and ample punishment was administered. He fully meant it then; he meant it just as resolutely now; but he had never once dreamed of the matter taking a turn like this.

Glenn Elliston was charged with being that secret spy, and enough evidence brought forward to justify this effort to arrest him. In the absence of Owen Tredgold, the real head of the moonshiners, John Mahar was called upon to take charge of the affair. He did so, but it was with a secret hope of clearing the accused. He could not believe him guilty of such damnable treachery. He felt that Elliston would have but little difficulty in proving his innocence, provided he was given time and opportunity for so doing. But he well knew how hard it would be to hold his mates in check when the game was once sprung. In their present state of mind, they were far more likely to punish first, then sift the evidence against their victim.

Lafe Dawson had not been in the county long enough to have wrought all the mischief. If he was guilty, he stood not alone. He was prompt and decided enough in declaring his own innocence; why did he hesitate and stammer and look so confused when Mark Tappan asked if he could declare on oath that he did not know the guilty one?

"Pin him down to that p'int, Mahar!" sharply added Tappan, with a frown. "You know we didn't come here to tackle jest him."

Lafe Dawson flashed an angry glance in that direction, but before Mahar could act on that blunt suggestion, he boldly faced his captors, his voice clear and distinct, his face pale and dogged.

"Look here, you! I'm not much better'n a stranger in these parts. I come here to make a honest livin'. So fur I've gone my way an' never wronged nobody. I say I hain't sold you out. I hain't give no information, to revenue man nor anybody else. Ain't that plain enough? What more kin you ax?"

"The hull truth, not on'y part of it," bluntly retorted Tappan. "You know who hes played us dirt. You kin p'int out the dirty

whelp as did sell us; an' now you've got to do it!"

"Or suffer the same penalty that awaits the informer!"

"Which is a dose o' hemp rope!"

"Give him a taste of it now, an' it'll be mighty apt to limber up that clapper o' his!" growled still another.

John Mahar impatiently lifted his hand and motioned for silence. He was obeyed, but the dark, menacing frowns warned him that unless he wished the command to be taken from him, he must lose no further time.

"You see, Lafe; it's a clean breast, or a stretched neck. If you know who the guilty man is, better spit it out in a hurry!"

"I don't know—"

"But you suspect," as the man hesitated at that word.

"So do you, durn it all!" Dawson snapped, with a vicious glance into that stern countenance. "Why don't you act on it, then, not drive a critter into twistin' the rope fer the neck o' one who's al'ays treated him clean white! Don't make a dog of a man who wants to treat everybody as they treat him!"

There was a brief silence. In his earnestness Dawson had said enough to condemn the man he sought to shield. Not one present but felt confident he was trying to shield Glenn Elliston.

He himself saw this a second later, and his florid countenance turned many shades paler. His lips parted as though he would try to cover the slip, but the murmur which came from the scowling moonshiners told him only too plainly that this would be worse than useless.

A sudden recklessness seemed to come over him. He flung back his head and spoke rapidly:

"I've done it now, hain't I? Waal, let it go at that. I'd a' saved him ef I could, but you badgered me into lettin' the cat out o' the bag an' now I'll do the clean thing. I'll tell all I know, an' then—when I git hands free ag'in, I'll put in good ten hours a day hard work to git even! I'll begin at the head an' go down to the foot, lickin' or gettin' licked! You hear me, boys?"

"You won't hev to call the roll twice, Dawson," laughed Tappan.

"You wouldn't be fit to answer it, ef I did."

"Drop that, an' get down to sober business," sternly interposed John Mahar. "What do you know about this matter? Who do you suspect o' sellin' us out to them bloodboun's?"

"It's you that's doin' the suspectin', not me," sullenly. "You think Elliston is the guilty one. Mebbe he is. Mebbe what I saw las' evenin', just after he come from town, 'll make them suspicious sartainty. Ef they do, I cain't help it. I ain't a dog, but I cain't be expected to hold my tongue an' git lynched fer another feller, kin I?"

"What was it you saw?" demanded Mahar, ignoring the question.

"Saw him hidin' papers in a hole—papers that he 'peared to be mighty keeful of, too! Saw it through plum' accident. Mebbe it won't help you out the least mite, an'—"

"Whar'll we find this hidin'-place?"

"Look behind that pictur' on the wall," lifting a finger and indicating which one he meant. "Ther's a hole in the plasterin', you'll find, an' the papers is in a little tin box."

John Mahar rose and lifted the picture. To all appearance the paper-covered wall was intact, but a closer examination showed that a small square of paper, plaster and laths could be lifted up on cunningly concealed hinges, revealing a small hole, in which was snugly fitted a tin box, with one end left open. Inside this was a much smaller box, which he extracted and opened.

From this he took a paper, folded in small compass. Opening it, he glanced rapidly over its contents, partly printed, the blanks being filled up with pen and ink. A dark frown spread over his face as he read.

"What does it mount to, neighbor?" sharply demanded Mark Tappan.

"It's a commission, or somethin' o' that sort," slowly responded the gaunt mountaineer. "It shows that Glenn Elliston is a reg'larly a'p'inted officer in the revenue service. It gives him power to 'rest everybody that he knows or hes cause to think is 'gaged in makin' moonshine whiskey."

"That cooks his cake, then!" grated Tappan, his eyes flashing.

A low, deadly sound came from the assembled moonshiners, and as Lafe Dawson glanced from face to face, he must have seen that the fate of his employer was sealed by that revelation. It may have been this that rendered him desperate, or it may have been with the hope of insuring his own safety; be that as it may, he broke out with a short, hard, reckless laugh that startled the angry mountaineers. And as they turned their blazing eyes upon him, he spoke rapidly:

"A feller might as well hang fer a hull flock as fer a single sheep! You've made me betray as kind a master as a body ever need ax fer, though I ain't sayin' he mightn't be a heap squarer man, as a man. Fact is, I know he could, ef he hedn't bin sp'iled in the makin'!"

"This ain't the time fer idle chatter, Lafe Dawson," sternly uttered John Mahar, replacing the paper in the box from which he had taken it. "Ef you know anythin' more, spit it out—an' mighty sudden, too!"

"You know when Owen Tredgold was tuck?"

"What hes that got to do with this case?"

"That's what I'm tryin' to tell ye," was the cool response. "Jest a little afore that—by scratchin' up my mem'ry I reckon I could pin it down to a day ef you want to be that particular—I happened on a paper in this very room, which the boss hed fergot fer a bit, I reckon. I looked at it, as 'most anybody would 'a' done, never thinkin'. It was writ' by the boss, from the looks, though I ain't takin' oath to that effect, mind ye. An' it was a clean 'scription of how strangers might find whisky stills, even in the dark an' without any other guide. Them stills, as I guessed, was yours, Mahar, an' yours, Tappan, an' yours, an' yours an' yours," nodding in rapid succession as his eyes passed from one moonshiner to another.

"What did you do with this paper?" slowly demanded Mahar.

"Left it right whar I found it," was the prompt response. "Why fer not? Elliston paid me my wages. He'd al'ays treated me white, an' I wasn't under no obligations to kick up a row."

"You knew he was sellin' us out, didn't ye?"

"I didn't know nothin'," was the dogged response. "The paper wasn't writ fer me to read. It might be writ' jest as a sort o' exercise, to limber up his pen. An' then I hearn the boss comin', an' I got out o' this in a hurry. When I come back, the paper was gone, an' it clean slipped my mind from that ontel now. I reckon beca'se I hed somethin' else to think of—somethin' else a heap more interestin'."

"What was that? Mind, only a clean breast'll save ye, Lafe!"

"Somethin' the boss talked to me 'bout, that same night. He axed me how much money I'd take to—"

Lafe Dawson paused abruptly, glancing quickly toward the open window, through which just then came the clatter of horse's hoofs on the lower road, growing plainer and more distinct with each moment. The same thought occurred to all, and John Mahar exclaimed:

"That's him comin' now—Glenn Elliston!"

CHAPTER XI.

A GHOST THAT KNEW TOO MUCH.

IN speechless horror Uncle Jax stared at that dread phantom. For the time being he was like one turned to stone, so far as the sense of motion was concerned. He could not move. He could only stare at the pale, ghostly face, dim and indistinct at first, but steadily growing plainer and more distinct, as the bluish flame upon its breast rose higher with its weird, smoke-like tongues.

The face which had stared stonily at him through the curls of steam in the hut of the hoodoo doctor—the face of the murdered detective, with the same uncanny, livid pallor that marked it when first discovered after death—as it was when Uncle Jax shiveringly forced himself to gaze upon it, with the water still dripping from it.

Then, as now, there was a bloody blotch marking the seat of life. A hole through the white linen, directly above the heart, where a revolver bullet had cut its deadly passage. And it was spoken of in low, subdued whispers by those who witnessed the removal, that when the body was first drawn from the water, one hand fell with outstretched finger touching the bullet-mark, as though mutely calling attention to the ghastly evidence.

And now, just as he had seen it then, Uncle Jax saw that white finger pointing at the blood-marked bullet-hole.

It was strange, but though he was incapable of moving a muscle during those first few seconds, and though his horror-dilated eyes were held spell-bound upon that dingy red blotch in the center of the blue, flickering flames, Uncle Jax could see every inch of that phantom shape. And he saw those livid lips slowly separate, and even before he heard the first sound, he knew that the ghost was about to address him.

"You summoned me, and I am here," came in slow, sepulchral accents, that sent a convulsive shudder over the frame of the negro. "It is time, surely! Time that the dread truth should be told! Time that this weary spirit of mine be given rest and oblivion!"

That voice seemed to partially dispel the paralysis which had benumbed poor Uncle Jax from the instant of recognizing that dread vision, and he shivered from top to toe, bowing his head and covering his eyes with trembling fingers, a hollow moan escaping his lips.

"All unprepared, I fell a victim to one whom I deemed my friend," slowly uttered the phantom, a movement of its arms permitting the cloak to fall together over his body, shutting out that weird light from view. "All unprepared I was hurled into the presence of my Maker. Not a moment for repentance. No time to breathe a prayer for mercy."

"Was it not enough to kill my body without

destroying my soul as well? Dooming my spirit to wander through the night without rest or ransom? Chaining it to the spot near which it lost its fleshly envelope! Condemning it to wander and never cease until the dastardly hand which sent the hissing lead through my heart is brought to justice!

"For ages—each mortal day an eternity to my weary spirit—have I suffered, forced to wait until your lips would pronounce the words that were to set my spirit free! The time has come at last! You summoned me, and I am here; speak, Ajax Telamon! Make known to all the world—the spirit world, now filling the air and fanning your bowed head with their wings—the name of the false friend who fired the dastardly shot! Confess, Ajax Telamon, and let me depart in peace!"

Only a groan from the old negro as his frosty head bowed lower, literally in the dust. Not for a single breath did he suspect that there was any imposition. All of his superstition was awake, and he never once doubted that this was the ghost of the murdered revenue detective, Pandy Rowell.

A brief space of silence, then that sepulchral voice came to his ears again, this time sounding sharper, harsher, as though impatient at the delay in uttering the confession he seemed to take for granted.

"Speak, Uncle Ajax! You dare not hesitate, after having used magic arts to compel my presence at this uncanny hour! Speak, Uncle Ajax, unless you would have the words wrung from your lips by torture such as even your fearful soul could never anticipate! Who shot me, Ajax Telamon Sarsfield? Who hurled my quivering body into the water?"

"Deed I do' know, marster!" groaned the poor negro, shivering like a leaf, groveling still lower in the dust.

"Dare you lie to me, dog!" sternly cried the spirit, stamping its foot with a decided echo.

"Nebber lie—nebber know nuffin' 'bout it, marster!" wailed Uncle Jax, his face to the ground, his bony fingers clasped over his bare skull, his elbows drawn in to closely shield his ears and neck.

"Then why did you summon me to this charmed spot? Why bury your magic talisman here where the roads cross, at this witching hour? Why take so much pains to insure my coming, if not for the purpose of satisfying offended justice?"

"Nebber done it, marster! Nebber wanted—nebber fink de charm wu'k dat way—cross my heart, sah!"

Not even the most skeptical of ghosts could for an instant have doubted the perfect sincerity with which these words were uttered. So full of misery, of fear, of repentance!

If no better result came from that dark night's work, it would prevent Uncle Jax from ever calling on Cunjur King Saul for a charm!

"And your heart is still stony, still deaf to justice, Uncle Jax?" and there was a softened, melancholy cadence that drew a subdued moan from the lips of the poor negro. "Think! Did I ever treat you unkindly while the breath of life was in my body? Did I ever curse at or abuse you? Have I not time and again filled your dingy paws with gold and silver? Did you ever do me a service that I failed to repay your time and trouble a thousand fold?"

Still silence, save for a low murmur that might have meant almost anything—save peace of mind or body!

"Yet you are still hard, still obdurate! When I tell you that I am doomed to wander through this cold and bitter world without rest or ceasing, until my murderer is brought to justice—until the dastardly crime of my murder is expiated in full—you can still lock your lips and refuse to utter that one word?"

Uncle Jax shivered convulsively, but managed to gasp:

"De time comin', marster. De law done hang a man, den you trouble no mo'! Cunjur King Saul he say so."

"And Cunjur King lied when he spoke those words," was the sharp, impatient response. "He is a fool as well as an impostor, Uncle Jax. You should suspect as much from the manner in which the charm he sold you has worked. You bought it to keep me away; it brought me to your side despite yourself."

Uncle Jax groaned in bitter, if unavailing regret.

"Cunjur Saul lied to you in that. He lied to you when he said that a dead man would break the spell, no matter whether that man was guilty or innocent. And you—Uncle Jax, would you burden your soul with a double crime? Would you hang Owen Tredgold for a crime which he never committed? Would you murder him, too?"

"De law, de law done do it, marster," gasped the old man, faintly.

"And you would keep silence, knowing his innocence as well as you do, Uncle Jax? You would lock your teeth and permit him to suffer a death of shame on the gallows for a crime another committed?"

"What I do, marster?" moaned the negro.

"Tell the truth, let the consequence be what it may," was the swift, stern response. "Go be-

fore the court and make full confession. Tell the story of that dastardly crime. Name the villain who murdered me, and receive the reward of a clear conscience."

"Nebber tell—can't tell—nuffin' to tell," muttered Uncle Jax, clearly recovering a little of his usual courage.

The ghost stamped its foot impatiently, and for an instant it appeared as though it was on the point of assaulting the cowering negro. But then it spoke, low and earnestly, a vein of melancholy running through its words:

"There is a limit to my powers as a spirit, old friend. Though I well know whose ruthless hand struck me down in death, I am restrained from mentioning that name while a single hope remains of having the black truth exposed by other and mortal lips. I am powerless, in that I can assume a visible shape only during the dead hours of night, and at cock-crow I fade away into nothingness, so far as mortal eyes are concerned. During the day, while I suffer on, I am wholly powerless. I am denied the privilege of entering court and testifying in favor of the innocent, while denouncing the truly guilty. Only for that, I would pity your grief and trouble you no more.

"Listen, Uncle Jax, and if you have really forgotten the events of that black, wretched time, recall them now.

"I came here, lighthearted and meaning no wrong or harm to anybody. I was wearied with hard work and sought rest in seclusion.

"I had a friend whom I had known for years. We attended the same school when boys; we kept term at the same college when young men; we fought in the same sad war, though on opposing sides; when that war was ended, we met again without a harsh word or a hard thought, true and sincere friends as of old.

"This old friend wrote to me, and I came in answer to his letter. I found him married, and living happily, though in reduced circumstances; for he had been on the losing side, and the greater portion of his property had left him. And only for my influence, Uncle Jax, not even the plantation on which I found him would have been left! The papers for its confiscation were already made out, when I interfered and had them canceled. Was this the work of an enemy who deserved such a sudden and cruel fate?"

Uncle Jax groaned in mental agony, still groveling in the dust at the feet of the ghost. He did not speak. He could not. For he knew that all this was true!

"I was gay and light-hearted, as why should I not be? Wearying work was left behind me. I brought not a care with me, to interfere with or mar my brief holiday. I was with my old friend. Though I refused to admit it when he charged me with the kindness, I knew that I benefited him as it is given but few men in this life to benefit another. Therefore, if I could have had any doubt, otherwise, none came to me now regarding my being perfectly welcome.

"It was long before I suspected my danger. Who could have suspected her—that gay, bright, seemingly angelic woman? Who could have foreseen what followed? Not I, for one!

"Before I suspected aught, I was in the toils of a beautiful, passionate, conscienceless woman! You remember her, Uncle Jax!"

The negro moaned as he moved uneasily. Surely he remembered!

"Before I realized my peril, I fell the victim of woman's wiles and man's unreasoning jealousy! And yet—before high Heaven I take oath, Uncle Jax!—there was no sin, no further wrong on my side than a harmless, thoughtless flirtation with a woman who, as the wife of my friend, was sacred to me as a sister! I swear this, Uncle Jax, yet because of that careless security, I was murdered! Shall I tell you the names of that woman and her husband? Need I do that, Uncle Jax?"

"Nebber knowed 'em, sah! Nebber knowed no sech pussons!" the old servant quavered, trying in vain to speak with steady promptitude.

In his desperation he lifted his head for the first time, looking up into that white, rigid face, trembling in every fiber, yet forcing himself to conquer his superstitious dread, lest he work irreparable injury to one whom he loved a thousand-fold better than life.

"There was a meeting, one day, near the river," said the ghost, in deep, sepulchral tones. "There was a shot fired—a dastardly murder committed—a still quivering corpse hurled into the waters! But the waters have given up their dead, Uncle Jax! The spirit of the murdered man demands vengeance on his slayer! Demands it of you, Uncle Jax!"

"I can't gib it, marster," muttered the negro, his voice growing steadier, a dogged look coming into his dust-covered face.

"You know who committed the crime, Uncle Jax!"

"Don' know nuffin.' Nebber knowed nuffin'. Kiss de good book, sah!"

The full moon shed its clear light over the cross-roads. It revealed the two strangely confronting figures with fair distinctness.

One kneeling humbly in the dust, with hands tightly clasped before his bowed, shivering body, but with gaze steadily, almost doggedly bent on the white, ghastly face of the being towering

above him. The other erect, one hand holding the folds of the long, dark cloak about him, his right hand raised, half in appeal, half in stern menace.

"Do not add to your sins by further perjuring yourself, Uncle Jax," the spirit of Pandy Rowell sternly uttered. "Listen to the horrible punishment which will certainly overtake you if you remain obstinate—if you still refuse to confess the truth, and while saving an innocent man from the gallows, bring a just and richly-merited punishment upon a red-handed assassin.

"Refuse to confess, and your every day shall be one of never-ceasing torture. Your every night shall be haunted as never mortal man was haunted before. Sleeping or waking, you shall never know rest, never know one instant of peace or content. Wherever you go, there you shall be attended by spirits and spooks and hobgoblins, bent on making your life a perfect hell upon earth! Others may not be able to see them, to hear or comprehend the words they sing in your terrified ears, but all the time you will hear and see and feel them—not a minute in each of the long hours will you be free from them!

"This is what it means to be a truly haunted man, Uncle Jax, and a haunted man will you remain unto the end of your wretched life, unless you make what amends you can for the criminal past."

The spirit of Pandy Rowell ceased speaking, sternly, menacingly gazing down upon the old negro. But Uncle Jax only muttered:

"Don't know nuffin'. Nebber knowed nuffin', marster!"

"Such will be the life, that you must lead, Uncle Jax, from now until the end of Owen Tredgold's trouble. If he should be condemned—if you permit this judicial murder to be consummated—listen, Uncle Jax!

"All that you may have suffered before, will be happiness sublime in comparison with what must then befall you! The ghosts will surround you in tenfold numbers, and to them will be added all the evil imps from the hottest pits of Tophet! And then, as a crowning punishment, Satan himself shall come to claim you! Not dead, but living, Uncle Jax! Alive—knowing that you are alive, never to die, always to suffer and endure the most frightful torments Satan in his malice can devise! To be alive, yet among the dead, Uncle Jax! Think of it!"

Now the poor, superstitious negro shivered until his teeth clicked audibly, and for the first time since he lifted them to that white, rigid, death-like face, his eyes grew unsteady, then closed in horror.

"Not dat, marster—not dat!" he moaned, his bowed form swaying to and fro, his bony hands twisting and writhing. "Kill a po' nigger, but don' put sech a awful cuss onto his head! Don' do it, kin' marster!"

"Then confess, Uncle Jax!" sharply responded the ghost, bending forward with a red light glowing in his dark eyes. "Tell the true story of that merciless assassination! Give the name of the murderer, before it is forever too late to lift the bitter, black curse!"

"I fess, kin' marster," faltered Uncle Jax; then his white head was flung back, his eyes glowing, his tones growing strong and full as he added swiftly: "I done it, marster! I shoot dat man! I kill Mars' Pandy Rowell!"

The being with the white face started back, a strange expression coming into his face that made it look much more life-like. A muttered oath came up in his throat, yet it was not altogether of rage or disappointment; it was mingled with admiration for such heroic self-sacrifice as this.

"Deed I done it, marster!" eagerly added Uncle Jax, rising to his feet with trembling haste, holding out his palsied hand as though he asked no greater boon than to be placed in irons. "Deed I done it, all o' my own se'f, sah. Debble got into me, an' des tole me to kill de man. No-body else nebber knowed nuffin' 'tall 'bout it, sah! Des me—des ole Unc' Jax by hisse'f, sah! Kiss de book, ef—"

A stern motion of the white hand checked his eager speech. Cold and hard came the words:

"You are lying, Uncle Jax, in hopes of saving another, whose life is not worth your little finger, black though you be. I honor you for your fidelity, foolishly exhibited though it is. You are one of a thousand, and deserve a better master than the one you are trying to shield from justice."

"Was me—was ole Unc' Jax, I done tol' ye!" harshly, almost savagely muttered the negro, recoiling a little, his clinched hands drawing back to his sunken chest. "Nobody else didn't nebber know nuffin' 'tall 'bout it, ain't you heah me tell?"

"Poor fool!" muttered the ghost, with a contemptuous pity that smacked far more of the mortal than the spirit.

"Dat it—poor, no 'count fool!" eagerly cried the old man, catching at each chance, however frail. "Ain't fit fo' libbin' longah, Unc' Jax ain't. He done fess de hull fing, sah! Done tek oaf he kill dat man. Nobody else done knowed anyfing 'bout it, sah! Des Unc' Jax—an' Unc' Jax ready fo' be tek to de gallows, sah—ready an' waitin'. All a lie who say anybody else done knowed it, sah! Des ole man, sah!"

That white hand moved out until it gently rested on the head of the feverishly anxious negro, though the owner's voice was cold and hard as he spoke again:

"You are a poor old fool, Uncle Jax, if you think you can save the real murderer by sacrificing yourself. Milton Sarsfield, your old master, murdered me, and flung my body into the river! You were a witness to that murder, and you've got to swear to the truth before the court that tries Owen Tredgold for the deed committed by Milton Sarsfield!"

Uncle Jax shrunk back with a gasping groan of mingled rage and grief. Then—swifter than one could believe possible—he whipped forth a heavy revolver, and thrusting it forward, fired!

CHAPTER XII.

MORE TRIBULATION FOR UNCLE JAX.

THE ghost reeled back, flinging up its hands with a sharp cry that had a strangely human sound to it.

Uncle Jax waited to see no more, but dropping his weapon he broke away from the cross-roads in headlong flight, running as he had never run before since his wool turned gray.

It was a sort of blind instinct that led to that shot, rather than anything like reasoning on his part. His superstition was no whit the less strong. Not for an instant did he doubt that this weird, white-faced, bloody-breasted being was really a ghost, an avenging spirit: he never once connected it with trickery, or fancied that it could be as mortal as himself.

Driven to desperation, his hand touched the butt of a weapon, and without stopping to think or reason, he blindly thrust it forward and fired once. Then he *did* feel—feel that he had severed his last link, destroyed his last chance of ever conciliating that avenging spirit. And in an agony of mingled horror and grief, the poor devil fled at top speed, blindly, unwitting whither his steps led him.

Even in that moment of madness he fancied that the dread threats of Pendy Rowell's ghost were already beginning to come true. He fancied that the air about him was thick and suffocating with horrible winged creatures. He fancied that he could feel them brushing against his face and person—fancied that he could see them, even when he closed his eyes tightly with a gasping moan of horror.

A haunted man! Haunted forever—haunted until death should come to relieve him of his misery—haunted by night and by day, sleeping or waking, never to be for an instant free from those horrible phantoms! Haunted wherever he went or whatever he did! Death would be a thousand times preferable to such a doom—death—

"Alive, Uncle Jax! Satan shall carry you off alive!"

The words seemed to float to him on the air, and a choking scream broke from his lips as he flung up his trembling hands and dashed on still more frantically. Not even in death would he find relief! Even death would shun him, unless he told the whole story of that sad tragedy. Unless he uttered the words that would save the life of Owen Tredgold and restore him to liberty. Unless he pronounced the doom of the really guilty. Unless he should set the bloodhounds of the law on the track of the actual assassin!

"I done it! Me—Unc' Jax!" he panted, scarcely conscious that the words were passing his lips, as he staggered on at top speed, reeling unsteadily, his poor brain whirling and throbbing like mad. "Nebber nobody else knowed nuffin 'bout it! Des me—des—"

His foot caught against some obstruction, and he fell headlong to the ground. A gasping cry mingled with his fall, but he made no attempt to arise. Motionless as though dead, Uncle Jax lay there in the road, his body in the shade cast by an adjacent tree, his head and shoulders out in the moonlight.

Poor Uncle Jax! Perhaps it would have been a merciful boon had that fall proved fatal. Perhaps it would have been better for him had he never come back to consciousness.

Poor, credulous, superstitious creature! Weak and erring, he was stronger than many of those who would have held their nose high in lofty scorn at the comparison. Strong enough to resist temptation when it promised him peace and safety at the expense of his fidelity. Strong enough to offer his own life as a sacrifice for another. Strong enough to defy a spirit. To conquer his own superstition.

Black though his face. Negro though he was, rude, unlearned, weak in morals and principles. A criminal, in that he permitted an innocent man to suffer for the deeds of another. Despite all this, Ajax Telamon Sarsfield was a hero.

How long that spell of unconsciousness lasted, Uncle Jax never fairly understood. All he knew was that when his eyes opened, it was still night; that he was lying on his back in the road, with his head supported on a friendly knee, a kindly face smiling over him, and gentle hands moistening his face with a cooling liquid.

"Was me—was des ole Unc' Jax—kiss de book!" he muttered gaspingly, his poor brain resuming the thread where it had broken off.

A low, relieved laugh checked his wanderings, and a well known voice rung pleasantly in his bewildered ears:

"Uncle Jax, I'm astonished at you, sir! Astonished and scandalized! A venerable patriarch like you getting drunk and lying down in the public highway to sleep it off! Uncle Jax—Uncle Jax!"

The poor old fellow opened his eyes still wider, drawing his head back to take a steadier view, slowly, doubtfully muttering:

"It am you, Mars' Glenn? Fo' suah it done you, sah?"

"Bite your thumb and see for yourself, Uncle Jax," lightly laughed the young man, as he steadied the negro in a sitting posture. "Indeed it is me, and none other. I wish I could as readily recognize you, old friend, but it's mighty hard work! I never saw you so thoroughly disguised in all my life! Uncle Jax, you want to touch it lightly! Distilled moonshine is mighty potent medicine, and powerful apt to get the upper hand of one who measures out his own dose!"

"You pokin' fun at ole man, Mars' Glenn," mumbled Uncle Jax as he glanced covertly, warily around them. "You ain't see'd 'em, Mars' Glenn? You hain't see'd nuffin lak—nuffin awful 'sterious, lak?"

"Like snakes and rats or the man with the poker, Uncle Jax?" laughed Elliston, but with a serious light in his eyes, a strange compression of his lips that told of deeper, stronger feelings held in reserve. "You want to taper off, and that in a hurry, old fellow, unless you want to throw the whole country into mourning for one of its oldest, most respected citizens! Let whisky alone, Uncle Jax, or—"

"Deed I hain't tuck nuffin sence—"

"The last time—of course! You're drunk, Uncle Jax, and mighty nigh ready for delirious trimmings to your case. Look out that they don't serve as funeral trappings, as well, Uncle Jax!"

"Drunk—Uncle Jax, drunk!"

"Precisely what I said, old friend: drunk and trying to sleep it off in the middle of the road. Lucky travel is not very brisk along this way, Uncle Jax, or there might have been a serious accident before I happened along. Get up, and let me see you safely home."

"Drunk—an' nebber a singly drap o' lickin' pass dese lips fo' long years! How I git drunk, Mars' Glenn?" muttered the bewildered old fellow, sniffing the air tremulously and mechanically smacking his lips.

Glenn Elliston laughed shortly as he retorted: "It must be the moonshine in the air, then, for if you don't smell like a perambulating still, I don't want a cent!"

"Dey is a sort o' smell—an' 'pears like I kin taste somefing like—it's de debbil's wuk!" Uncle Jax cried, with a sudden suspicion that started the cold sweat out all over his person.

"Devil's work and devil's brew, sure enough!" with a dark frown and instinctive clinching of his hands. "There's a bitter black curse upon the vile poison, and upon all who handles it! Would that I could sweep it all out of existence—but that wouldn't undo the foul work it has already accomplished, worse luck!"

Uncle Jax was not listening, was not paying attention to this passionate outburst. This fresh suspicion was troubling him sorely, and trembling like a leaf he glared around them, expecting to behold some grim and gruesome sight.

The fact that nothing of the kind greeted his vision failed to greatly reassure him. He felt that the mocking demons were there, even though at that instant invisible.

He feebly smacked his lips, and sniffed the tainted air. There could be no doubt; it *was* whisky, and the solemn oath he took when that heavy blow fell upon him, years ago, had been broken. But how?

"De debble done it!" he moaned, shivering from head to foot. "De debble done it, to catch me in a trap! Done it to git me drunk, an' den to talkin' foolish! But it all a lie—nigger nebber tell de trufe when he drunk like dat! Whisky mek lie come—you know dat, Mars' Glenn!" turning to the frowning young man, who gave a start as though for a moment unconscious of his surroundings.

"A lie—of course it is a lie—black and foul as the brain that first concocted it!" passionately cried the young man, brushing a hand hurriedly across his damp brow. "I've sworn to expose it—to bring the whole truth to light! You can help me there, Uncle Jax," he added, with an abrupt change of voice as he caught the trembling negro by the arm, gazing keenly, eagerly into his face. "You can throw some light on the sad affair, if you will!"

"Deed de ole man don't know no more dan nuffin whar it come from nur who gib it, Mars' Glenn! Deed I nebber tetch de whisky—"

Elliston laughed shortly, dropping his arm as he interposed:

"Is that what troubles you, Uncle Jax? I gave you the stuff, when I stumbled over you lying here in the road like a drunken bog! At first I thought that you had met with some accident, and so took the shortest method of restoring your senses. But I failed to find any

marks or injuries. You have been hitting the bottle too hard, Uncle Jax!"

"An' dar wasn't no smell ob whisky afo' you come, Mars' Glenn?" with breathless eagerness, a terrible weight lifting from his heart.

"I didn't stop to investigate so closely," with a laugh. "You ought to know best, Uncle Jax."

"Fo' more'n a y'ar I nebber tetch no whisky, marster," more quietly observed the old man, furtively brushing the sweat from his brow. "Mighty sorry you gib it to me dis time, sah—mighty sorry!"

"The bit I gave you'll never make your head too big for your hat in the morning, Uncle Jax. But how come you so, if it wasn't whisky? What are you doing out here at this time o' night? Where have you been, and what happened to you?"

"Des—des out fo' lilly walk, marster," mumbled Uncle Jax, his eyes drooping, his fingers nervously entwining. "Couldn't sleep, somehow—'pears like dey too much 'tricity in de air, sah!"

"That, or some other sleep-disturbing power!" muttered Elliston, with a faint smile. "I was troubled in much the same manner, I guess. I could not go home, or even think of getting to bed, though it's precious little sleep I've had for the past week or two! Sleep? who *could* sleep, when there's so much trouble in the air? Uncle Jax!"

"Ye—yes, marster," faltered the negro, uneasily.

"Uncle Jax, do you know that Owen Tredgold is in great peril of his life? That he is held for trial on the charge of having murdered that revenue detective, Pendy Rowell?"

"So I—so dey say, marster."

"And all the evidence against him is the foul charge of a vile liar, Uncle Jax! A lying coward who dares not even make that charge over his own name, Uncle Jax! Think of that, will you! An honest man to be cast into prison for an atrocious crime, on no better evidence than an anonymous charge! It is a burning shame, Uncle Jax!"

"Yes, marster," falteringly.

"Just think of it, will you? An honest man torn from his home and family, dragged to jail, like the vilest of criminals, and shut up there from his friends and well-wishers—for what? Simply because a cowardly perjurer charges him with committing a crime the memory of which had long ago faded from the mind of every man who knew of it at the time!"

Uncle Jax moaned faintly, mechanically shaking his head. Not from every mind—not from at least one memory.

"With his wife lying on a sick bed, from which she might never rise in life, Uncle Jax! From his loving daughter, who was forced to remain behind lest that sick wife and mother suffer worse! And he innocent as the child in its crib, Uncle Jax! Think of it—think of it well, old friend, and then say what a man deserves who could remedy all this with a single word! Who could set the innocent free, and put the guilty man in his place, by simply coming forward and detailing the tragedy, just as it occurred! What does such a man deserve, Uncle Jax?"

"Deff, marster—deff by hangin' like he done de killin' wif he own han'," softly uttered the old negro, a bright light coming into his eyes as they involuntarily glanced upward.

How gladly he would have accepted death as full atonement! After what had happened that night, he felt that death by hanging would be a boon, rather than a fate to be avoided with horror.

"All of that, Uncle Jax," gravely responded Elliston, his gray eyes glowing brightly as they closely watched the negro. "Even worse, should he keep silence still longer—should he dare to keep his ghastly secret fast locked in his own bosom until that innocent man was tried, condemned and executed for a deed his hand never committed! And worse than death would surely be the doom of such a heartless wretch, Uncle Jax! Death would be a glad boon to him, I tell you! He would never know a moment's peace or quiet! He would be constantly haunted by the spirit of his victim—haunted until his brain gave way and he went mad, to suffer all the tortures of the damned in this life! And in the other, Uncle Jax? What would be his reward there? For this life is not all, Uncle Jax. It is only the beginning. Only the first breath which a man of a hundred years draws. Think of that, Uncle Jax!"

"Ain't I done fink it all ober time an' time ag'in?" desperately muttered the poor fellow, for an instant forgetting the strict guard which he had put over his lips. "Ain't I fink—"

"And you have repented, Uncle Jax?" eagerly asked Elliston, leaning forward, his grip tightening as he awaited the expected answer.

An answer came, but it was not the one he expected or hoped for. That flush of eagerness put Uncle Jax once more on his guard, and with a hypocritical whine he mumbled some platitudes about reflection and repentance for his many sins; about his "gettin' 'ligion" at the first opportunity that offered.

Elliston frowned blackly, and his fingers

closed with a grip that caused the negro to wince with pain. At this Glenn released him, with a short, cold laugh.

"You'll need all the religion you're likely to get, old man, or I'm widely out in my estimate of your character. And the sooner you lay in a big stock of it, the better, if you are bent on keeping up these nocturnal prowls of yours. What happened to you to-night? Was it sudden religion that flattened you out in the road here?"

"Reckon mebbe 'twas, sah," muttered Uncle Jax, with a furtive look around, dreading the reappearance of that white-faced phantom to contradict that assertion.

"The devil's religion then, I reckon!" with a sneer. "Was that your patron saint, Uncle Jax, who stole you away from the men up yonder last night?"

"He said he was de debble, sah!" shivered the old man nervously.

"His looks don't greatly belie him, then! What did he do with you, Uncle Jax? How did you slip out of his clutches?"

"Don't talk ob it, Mars' Glenn!" with a doleful groan and another apprehensive glance around. "It too awful fo' to talk 'bout out heah in de night! Mebbe he heah what we say, an' den—"

"Even Satan himself can't well take offense at the plain truth, and you are 'way above telling a lie, Uncle Jax; not a soul in all the county but knows that! A lie would stick in your throat until it choked you to death, Uncle Jax; wouldn't it?"

Softly as Elliston spoke, a smile beaming on his face, Uncle Jax cowered uneasily, a low moan escaping his lips. Just then he could better have faced stern threats or fierce upbraidings.

"All right, Uncle Jax," added Elliston, with a soft, genial laugh. "Never mind telling the story, if it troubles you; let it pass for the present. Doubtless it will keep for a more favorable opportunity, and without its losing any of its flavor or interest. It is enough for me to see that you did escape, without suffering any material injury."

"Nebber git hu't much, marster."

"And it pleases not only me, but one other will be very glad to learn that you are none the worse for your wild ride, Uncle Jax," gently added Elliston. "She thinks pretty near all the world of you, Uncle Jax! You should have seen how she turned upon me last night when I begged her not to run the risk—when I implored her to leave your rescue to me! Why, for a moment I almost fancied a wildcat was flying in my face!"

"Leave you to me? 'Why,' she said, 'Uncle Jax has ever proved himself faithful and true to me! He has served and honored me as though I were a queen! He would lay down his life at any moment, to save me from injury, or from one single pang of pain, bodily or mental! If I were in peril—if any one dear to me was in like peril—and Uncle Jax could save me or them, think you he would hold back to see another take his place? That would be the act of a coward—a criminal! And Uncle Jax is neither. He would die for me or mine, and I can do no less!"

"That is what she said, Uncle Jax, though a thousand times more earnestly than I can repeat her words. You should have seen her face as she uttered them, uncle Jax—the face of an angel! As for what she did, I need not remind you of that! You saw her—you heard her vow to shoot the first man who dared lay a finger on you in violence. Kind, gentle, tender-hearted though she is when in repose, Uncle Jax, just then she would have kept her oath to the very letter. One touch of the rod which Bion Barnave was flourishing over your back, would have drawn a bullet straight from her pistol through his brain. And all for you, Uncle Jax—all for you, remember!"

"She kin'—too kin' fo' ole nigger!" moaned Uncle Jax, shifting his weight uneasily from one foot to the other, casting a furtive look around as though to make sure the coast was clear for hasty flight.

But if such were his thoughts, they were frustrated by Glenn Elliston, whose hand once more dropped upon his shoulder, not firmly, but with a gentle, almost caressing touch. And his voice was still softer as he spoke again:

"Thus she spoke, and thus she believed, Uncle Jax. Was she mistaken in her estimate of you, old friend? Would you act as she indignantly predicted, or would you, if the test ever came, prove yourself the coward and criminal by denying her aid?"

"I gib her life—gib life to sabe her f'om trouble, marster," impulsively cried Uncle Jax, the hot tears starting in his bloodshot eyes, his voice choking.

"Then the time has come, old man!" sternly cried Elliston, his grip tightening on the arm of the old negro, his eyes all aglow. "She appeals to you for that sacred duty—the duty she earned at your hands by her heroic action last night. She asks you to speak the word that will set her innocent father free from the toils some devilish enemy has so cunningly wound about him! She begs of you to reveal the true story

of that black tragedy; to confess the name of the one who really murdered Pandy Rowell!"

Uncle Jax made no effort to escape from that fierce grip, though Elliston felt a strange shiver creep over him. He cowered for an instant, but as quickly recovered, gazing straight into those flashing eyes, his dusky face motionless as a mask of iron. Then, when Elliston ceased speaking, his lips parted to utter:

"All I kin do fo' Miss Lidy, dat I do, free as air an' mighty glad fo' de chaine, marster. But dis is mo' dan in my powah, sah. I nebber know who kill Mars' Pandy Rowell."

"Uncle Jax!"

"It de Gospel trufe, Mars' Glenn," was the steady response, still unflinchingly meeting that flashing gaze. "Ole nigger don' know who kill him, but he go 'fore de court an' sw'ar he do, ef Miss Lidy ax it. Go dar an' kiss de good book while he say dat he kill 'im—Unc' Jax kill 'im—ef Miss Lidy ax it, sah!"

It did not sound like empty vaunting, uttered in those quiet, deliberate tones, and accompanied by that steady gaze. Even in the depth of his disappointment Glenn Elliston felt this, and could not entirely smother a feeling of admiration for the speaker, poor negro though he was. After all, may they not have made a mistake? Did Uncle Jax know anything positive as to the person who murdered Pandy Rowell?

Thoughts something similar to these flashed through the busy brain of the young man as he stood in brief silence gazing into those haggard, bloodshot, but unflinching eyes. Almost involuntarily the words came to his lips:

"Uncle Jax, where is Milton Sarsfield hiding himself?"

"Mars' Sarsfield libbin' in for'n parts, sah," bowed the negro, with strong emphasis on the word substituted for the one used by Elliston.

"Uncle Jax, it was Milton Sarsfield who rescued you last night."

Even as he cast this shaft Elliston saw that it had failed to strike home. That look of ludicrous bewilderment could not have been so quickly counterfeited, and with a frown of disappointment he turned partly aside, to utter a sharp cry as he saw that same wild, shaggy-haired creature moving slowly toward them through the moonlight. His grip tightened on Uncle Jax's shoulder as he pointed and whispered hoarsely:

"There he is now! Who and what is he?—on your life, old man!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AN OMINOUS RECEPTION.

UNCLE JAX cringed beneath that fierce grip, rendered doubly close by excitement and the sudden suspicion which had once more assailed the brain of Glenn Elliston. His back was turned toward the point where the wild horseman of the previous night, now on foot and seemingly unconscious of their close proximity, had made his appearance. No sound had heralded his coming, and the old negro could only stammer:

"Who—whar—wha' is it, Mars' Glenn?"

Strange how that wild and seemingly impossible suspicion haunted Glenn Elliston! The first minute of leisure after that strange rescue of Uncle Jax from the hands of the moonshiners by that wild, weird rider—the first minute spent in trying to solve that enigma—told Glenn Elliston that this pretended madman was the long-absent Milton Sarsfield himself!

He told himself that it must be instinct that led him to this conclusion, for whenever he tried to calmly reason it out, to smooth away the many improbabilities, he could not answer the arguments sober reason brought forward, and that suspicion faded away like the human breath from the polished surface of a mirror.

To return again and again, with strange persistence. Lida Tredgold convinced him that it was impossible this wild creature and Milton Sarsfield could be one and the same person. That day he had talked with several of the mountaineers about the curious affair, and without betraying his purpose, managed to gain a tolerably clear description of Milton Sarsfield. Unless all these were mistaken, then this wild horseman could not be the missing planter.

Still the suspicion would return, and it was very strong when the young man closely questioned Uncle Jax concerning his weird rescuer. It faded away, as it ever did when confronted with the proofs, as the old negro replied, only to flash back with redoubled force as Glenn caught sight of the strange being slowly approaching them, coming from the direction of the Big House.

"Yonder—behind you, old man!" grated Elliston, his free hand pointing toward the slowly sauntering figure. "Who is it? On your soul, Uncle Jax, is not that Milton Sarsfield?"

Apparently Uncle Jax did not hear the hastily uttered words. At that gesture, he twisted his head around and glanced down the road. A choking, spasmodic cry rose in his throat as another trembling fit attacked him. He shrunk back as though he would take to headlong flight, but as Elliston tightened his grip, a hoarse, rasping scream broke from the old man's lips.

"Ha'nted! I's a ha'nted nigger! De debble—de debble done come fo' ole Uncle Jax ag'in!"

Sabe me, Mars' Glenn—sabe ole nigger f'om white hairy debble!"

With a wild, quivering scream, Uncle Jax surged forward and closed with the man whom he begged to save him, and such was his impetus that before Elliston could brace himself he was overthrown, both men coming to the ground with a resounding jar, tight locked in each other's arms.

"Don' leff him—skeer him off, Mars' Glenn!" gurgled Uncle Jax, as he clung with frantic desperation to the young man, whose main efforts were devoted to freeing himself from that anaconda-like hug. "He de debble—de debble done got a grudge ag'in' ole nigger! Don'—don' leff him tek ole—"

"Let up, you infernal idiot!" snarled Elliston, writhing and twisting until his right arm was free, when his sinewy fingers closed on the throat of the negro, pushing his head backward with irresistible force.

Another desperate effort, and Elliston flung Uncle Jax clear of his breast, springing to his feet, one hand seeking the butt of a revolver while the other brushed the dust from his smarting eyes. He glared around in quest of that shaggy-haired figure, but without success. And a grating oath escaped his lips as he realized that another chance had escaped him through the incredible stupidity of this old negro.

Was it stupidity? Was it not all a plan to enable that strange being to escape him? Was not Uncle Jax trying to repay the service done him on the night last past?

Even as he sprang hastily forward to the point where he had last caught a glimpse of the stranger, these suspicions found birth in his whirling brain.

Pistol in hand and ready for instant use, Glenn Elliston glared about him, seeking to discover that shaggy-haired stranger. Across the strips of moonlight and into the shadows beneath the trees his keen eyes glanced, but without success. If the wild horseman had indeed been a spirit, or the foul fiend as proclaimed by Uncle Jax, he could not have vanished more completely or suddenly.

True, there were many spots where a man might hide, safe from all but a systematic search. There were dense patches of shadow. Clumps of bushes and brambles. Patches of vines and creepers. All within a distance which might be covered by an active man during the brief period occupied by that fierce struggle in the arms of Uncle Jax. Any one of those hiding-places might shelter the one he sought, but to uncover him would be a matter of time—would be a work of no mean danger, should the stranger have reasons for not wishing an interview.

And then—an angry cry escaped the lips of the young man, as he saw Uncle Jax scramble to his feet and take to hasty flight.

"Halt, you black rascal!" he cried, fiercely, for the moment forgetting the stranger, springing forward in angry chase of the fleeing negro. "Halt, I say, or I'll bring you to a halt with a bullet!"

He lifted his weapon with that intention, and even caught bead on the skurrying figure, but then refrained. Angry though he was with Uncle Jax, he could not bring himself to kill or cripple the poor fellow. And elevating the muzzle of his pistol, he sent a bullet whistling through the air over his head.

That served every purpose, for with a howling cry, Uncle Jax seemed to stumble and then plunged headlong to the ground, rolling over and over, groaning and mumbling as Glenn Elliston came up with him.

"G'way—oh, g'way, good mars' 'ebble! Unc' Jax done nuffin'—Unc' Jax done dead an' boun' fo' glory!"

"I'll devil you, you rascal!" grated Elliston, as he rolled the negro over with one deftly-applied foot. "Stop that infernal howling and get up! Stop it, or I'll ram my foot to the knee in your mouth!"

"Good Mars' Debbles!" gasped Uncle Jax, opening his tightly-closed lids and glancing up—to stop short with a subdued howl of delight. "You, Mars' Glenn? Den de debble ain't—"

Elliston stooped, and fastening on the collar of the negro, brought him to his feet with a single jerk. Holding him with a grip of steel, gazing angrily into his eyes, the young man sternly uttered:

"You've played the devil, Uncle Jax! And if I was only dead certain you played it with malice aforethought, I'd strip your black hide away inch by inch!"

"An' de debble—de debble's gone, Mars' Glenn?" stammered Uncle Jax, glancing quickly, shiveringly around as though unable to fully realize that glad fact.

If acting, it was perfectly done. If playing a part, Uncle Jax proved himself letter-perfect. So perfect that Glenn Elliston began to doubt again. Surely this was real, not assumed.

"Gone—yes!" with something that sounded suspiciously like an angry oath. "Gone—while you spread yourself all over me like a fly-blister! Only for that—Uncle Jax, who was that fellow? Lie to me now, and you'd better have died in your cradle!"

"Deed I mos' wish I had!" moaned the old

man, the very personification of misery and wretchedness. "Ain't wuff libbin' dis way! Ain't no good libbin' to be ha'nted an' bedebbled an'—"

Glenn Elliston shifted his strong grasp from shoulder to throat, and the muzzle of his pistol made a dent in the temple of the negro.

"Drop that whining and come down to sober business, Uncle Jax!" he sharply uttered, his face pale and resolute. "You're playing a game that will land your throat in a mighty snug-fitting noose, if you keep it up much longer. That shaggy-haired fellow is Milton Sarsfield; where is he hiding? What is he hiding for? Out with it, and lively!"

Even as he uttered the questions, his heart sunk within his bosom, for he could not mistake the look of bewildered astonishment that came into the face of his captive.

"Mars' Sarsfield—dat debble—hidin'—dat gits me, bad!" gasped Uncle Jax, his stiffened muscles relaxing, his wide eyes staring at his captor in stupefied wonder.

Almost involuntarily Glenn Elliston relaxed his grasp, and the old man staggered back a pace or two, staring into his white face like one who has serious doubts as to his complete sanity.

"If not Milton Sarsfield—if not one in whom you took a powerful interest—why did you connive at his escape when chance brought him fairly into my power? Why did you trip me up and shout out to give that mysterious scoundrel warning?"

"Mars' Sarsfield—why he in for'n pahts, boss!"

Elliston frowned darkly, but by biting his lip sharply, he managed to check the retort that sprung up in his throat. Excited, irritated though he was by the strange events of that night, he could see that naught was to be gained of Uncle Jax by open threats, granting that he was really concealing important information.

"Then you don't know who that fellow was, old friend?" he contrived to utter in a steady, softened voice.

"De debble, sah!" muttered Uncle Jax, shivering anew as he glanced nervously about them as though expecting to behold some terrifying manifestation of that dread title. "Dat's what he said wif his own two lips, Mars' Glenn! Hope to die ef it ain't de gospel trufe, now!"

"If you hadn't acted so clumsily, I'd have turned him into a ghost in a hurry!" muttered the young man, with a moody frown.

"Talk low, Mars' Glenn! Ef he heard you say like dat— Good Lord be wid us bofe!" gasped Uncle Jax, with a hollow groan.

"Nothing worse than a screech-owl, you idiot," muttered Elliston, unable to wholly suppress a laugh at the ludicrous dismay expressed in voice and body at that shrill, diabolical sound. "Your nerves are going back on you, Uncle Jax! One would almost be tempted to believe you carry a guilty conscience about with you!"

"Ole man gittin' sick, Mars' Glenn—feelin' pow'ful weak an' squawmy 'bout de stomick, boss!" groaned the old man.

"You'd better go home and turn in, Uncle Jax. But first—what shall I tell Miss Lida? Haven't you a word of comfort to send to her? Haven't you a single gleam of hope to lighten her darkened pathway?"

Uncle Jax stifled his moans, drawing his gaunt figure erect and firmly meeting that keen, suspicious gaze as he slowly uttered:

"Say to Miss Lidy des dis, marster. Say to her dat Unc' Jax ain't fo'git how mighty kin' an' noble she act to'ds him. Say to Miss Lidy dat Unc' Jax got feelin's, ef he be nuffin' but ole nigger. Say to Miss Lidy dat her pap nebber be hung fo' what dey say he done, ef Unc' Jax hab fo' go into court an' 'fess he killed Mars' Pendency Rowell he own se'f, sah!"

"But you didn't kill him, Uncle Jax!"

"Ef de wu'st come, Unc' Jax kiss de good book an' tek oaf he done killed him, Mars' Glenn, 'fore de hull court. De best o' niggers ain't wuff much now, Mars' Glenn, an' Unc' Jax done see his best day long 'fore Miss Lidy bornded. Don' mattah much how soon he go, now. Bettah hang ole wore out nigger dan hang fine man lak Mars' Tredgold. You tell Miss Lidy not to fret. All come out right in de eend, say. Dat 'nough to tell her; des say all come right ef she wait an' pray."

"I'll deliver your message, Uncle Jax, but it shall not come out right after that fashion," quietly uttered the young man. "It's the guilty man who has got to pay the penalty, not an innocent one."

"Ef nigger tek oaf he guilty, who say he lie? Who say he big fool 'nough to twist rope fo' he own se'f when it ain't desarb? You git laugh at, Mars' Glenn, ef you try to mek 'em b'liebe sech foolishness!"

There was an irritableness in the old negro's tone and manner as he uttered these words that strangely affected Glenn Elliston. He did not know what to say, or just what to do under the circumstances. He could not bring himself to think Uncle Jax the murderer, yet there was much to favor this fresh suspicion.

Before he could make up his mind just what to do, Uncle Jax bowed humbly, turned on his heel and strode rapidly away in the direction of the Big House. Glenn made an impulsive mo-

tion as though to check him, but checked himself instead.

That new suspicion was working in his mind, and he wanted time to think it over, to view the case from this new point. And, too, he had satisfied himself that there was nothing to be extracted from Uncle Jax by threats or persuasion. If the secret was to be gained from him, other means must be employed.

The moment Uncle Jax passed out of sight around the bend in the road, Glenn Elliston rapidly cut across, to intercept and keep him in view, himself remaining unseen.

Just what he expected to learn by this, would probably have puzzled him sorely to tell. In good truth, his brain was so thoroughly confused that he could not reason with anything like clearness.

It was barely possible that Uncle Jax was trying to shake him off so that he might gain an interview with that strange being; the one who had run such great risk in saving the old fellow from the grip of the infuriated moonshiners; the being whom, in turn, Uncle Jax had saved from capture by his frantic fear—real or assumed.

"If he does—if they do meet, and I see them—I'll get at the bottom facts if I have to shoot them both!" grimly muttered Elliston as he crouched low down in the shade of a bush, watching Uncle Jax as he came around the curve in the road.

Uncle Jax was bowed, his movements hurried, but with a peculiar air of weariness, of dejection, that little favored the supposition he was hastening to keep an appointment with friend or foe. He cast no looks around. He strode on without glance or pause to listen. His superstitious fears for once seemed entirely dead.

Silently, stealthily as an Indian warrior on the warpath, Glenn Elliston dogged the negro, never losing sight of him for a single moment until the Big House was reached. He saw Uncle Jax open the front door and enter. He ran noiselessly forward, listening at the keyhole; but not a sound came from the interior to reward him. He silently tried the door, but though the knob turned freely, that was all. The door was locked and bolted.

As silently as he had approached, Glenn Elliston retreated, his brows contracted, his eyes glowing dully.

In high hopes he had begun his work of that night. He felt confident that Uncle Jax could reveal the manner in which Pendency Rowell came by his death, and he believed that by playing on the superstition of the old negro, he could extract a full confession from him.

He had tried this, and failed. He had tried pleading, tried argument, with no better results. True, there was a faint hope to be extracted from the last words of the old man. If he would go forward and clear Owen Tredgold, by accusing himself of the murder, the bottom facts would almost surely come forth; but would he make this great sacrifice, all for gratitude?

"Not if he is really innocent of the crime," muttered Elliston, with a frown and shake of his head, as he paused for a last glance at the Big House. "But is he? Is he the actual murderer, or is he simply trying to shield the criminal? Did Milton Sarsfield kill Pendency Rowell? Did Uncle Jax commit the deed, hired by his master, or led to do so by his love for Milton Sarsfield? If neither, why has he been so richly rewarded? Why did Milton Sarsfield leave him all this property—for that's about what it amounts to! Why—unless to reward him for slaying a rival, or for hiding the bloody crime of his master?"

It was a point not so easy to decide, after the peculiar manner of the old man that night. Before that interview, Elliston felt hardly the ghost of a doubt as to the guilt of Milton Sarsfield.

"And who is that mysterious fellow with the shaggy hair?" he muttered, frowningly, as he paused by the side of his horse, hidden deep within the timber. "What part has he to play in this mystery? Lida declares that he cannot be Milton Sarsfield. Uncle Jax swears he is the devil! Was he throwing dust in my eyes? I can't make that come clear, for if ever there was an astonished mortal, Uncle Jax was that same when I declared that fellow Milton Sarsfield in disguise."

There was strong disgust in face and voice as Glenn Elliston muttered thus to himself. The way had seemed so open and free from obstacles when he started out that night on the hunt for the real murderer of Pendency Rowell. It had grown terribly tangled up now!

"I'm no good to-night," he finally decided, with an impatient toss of his head, unfastening his horse and springing into the saddle. "I've got to get some sleep. Maybe that'll help clear my brain of all these blessed tangles. If not—"

His voice died away, the alternative being too black and bitter for utterance even mentally.

There was so much depending on success. The life of Owen Tredgold, for one thing. Although he had not closely investigated the affair, partly from lack of time and opportunity, from what the prisoner had told him during their last brief interview, Elliston knew that unless the real criminal was brought to light, be-

yond a reasonable doubt, the moonshiner chief would almost certainly be doomed to death.

The snares had been cunningly laid for his feet, and he was sorely tangled up in them. All the more surely from the fact that, as yet, he was kept in perfect ignorance as to who was bringing the black charge of murder against him. All that was admitted was the fact of the charge being made, and sworn to, after a legal fashion. The rest he would discover when brought up for trial.

"Bion Barnave is at the bottom of it all, I'll take oath!" muttered Glenn Elliston as he rode rapidly toward his own home through the night. "Doubtless he thinks to win Lida by this trick—he may even make her hand a condition of saving her father from a shameful death. If he does—"

The sentence was not completed in words, but if Bion Barnave could have seen the fierce look which came into the face of his hated rival just then, he might have drawn back in doubt and irresolution.

A goodly distance lay between the Big House and the little cottage where Glenn Elliston made his home, but he was well mounted, and the animal was impatient to gain his snug quarters where its delayed supper awaited it, and neither whip nor spurs were needed to quicken its pace.

Whether he rode fast or whether he crept at a snail's pace, Glenn Elliston could hardly have explained with anything like certainty. His brain was in a whirl of doubts and hopes, of wild plans and schemes which he vainly strove to regulate and bring to order. He had lost so much sleep during the past week or so, that he was in poor condition to plan or reason clearly. He knew this, yet he could not keep from trying to see some glimmer of hope, some plausible way through the puzzling labyrinth in which he had so unexpectedly become involved.

The sharp, glad neigh of his horse at sighting its quarters, served to arouse the young man from his perplexing musings, and shaking himself together, he rode direct for the barnyard gate, drawing rein as he caught sight of a dark figure coming out of the stable, asking:

"That you, boss?"

"Yes, Dawson," Elliston promptly responded. "I hardly expected to find you up, though. Hope you haven't tuck sick—hed the colic mighty bad," mumbled the hired man as he swung the gate open. "He's all right now, but I reckoned I'd best stay with him for a bit. I'll take keer o' Morgan, boss, as it's right in my way. You'll find the front door open."

There was nothing in all this that could arouse the suspicions of the young man. Ever since his coming to the place, Lafe Dawson had proved himself a willing hand, never shirking his work, ever ready to turn a hand to whatever came in his way. Therefore there was nothing to deserve notice in this offer, though Elliston was accustomed to taking care of his own horse.

"All right—if it isn't too much to ask, Dawson," he said, with a weary yawn as he dismounted and passed the halter to the traitor. "The front door is unlocked, you say?"

"Yes. I've bin runnin' out an' in all the night, purty nigh," was the prompt response as the fellow moved away toward the stable. "You kin shet up ef you like, fer I'll stick it out with the sick hoss, now it's come so nigh mornin'."

Elliston made some cheery response, then strode up to the front door, flinging it open and stepping across the threshold—to utter a sharp cry of angry wonder as a blinding light was cast full in his face, while a stern voice rung out:

"Han's up an' empty, Glenn Elliston! We've got you kivered dead, an' ef you try to kick up a bobbery, I know who'll come out second best—an' so 'll you ef you take a squint 'round ye!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GHOST MATERIALIZES.

As already stated, it was with a very human-like cry that the spirit of Pendency Rowell started back from the blinding glare of the revolver which exploded in the hand of Uncle Jax. And for a spirit, this Ghost Detective did some remarkable contortions immediately after that hasty and all-unexpected shot, reeling and staggering, with hands clasping its face, groaning curses coming gratingly from its lips.

It was only a chance, merciful or otherwise, that saved Uncle Jax from putting this inquisitive being really on the "ghost list." His weapon, flung up and fired without any thought of taking aim, was discharged so close to that white face that the powder burned and blistered the skin, blackening three parts of its surface, changing its aspect all in an instant. The bullet passed so close to one side of his face that the lobe of an ear was clipped off, smooth and clean!

Quite sufficient to disconcert even a genuine ghost, one would say, let alone a spurious one, manufactured for the occasion.

For the first few seconds after that blinding flash, the Ghost Detective fancied his eyes had been shot away. He had thoughts only for this awful calamity, and had not Uncle Jax been so wholly absorbed in his own terrors, so busily oc-

occupied in hasty flight from the terrible apparition which his dearly-bought charm had summoned, that worthy old man might have suspected the truth: that this spirit was a very mortal affair, after all!

For a few moments—then a gleam of light came to his smarting eyeballs, and the Ghost Detective dropped his hands, turning his face upward, uttering a glad cry as he caught sight of the full moon.

"Not blind—devil burn that slippery old coon! Who'd 'a' thought it of him? And he scared out of his wits! 'Most as bad scared as I was, a bit ago!"

A curious jumble, poured forth with hardly room for punctuation. A mixture of joy, anger, disgust, surprise, with a certain portion of grim admiration at the manner in which Uncle Jax had turned upon and baffled him at the last moment.

"Just when I felt sure I had him where the wool was shortest!" he added, with a snort of disgust as he swiftly dashed the tears of pain from his eyes and glared around in quest of the old negro.

He caught a glimpse of the gaunt figure rushing through the mingled moonlight and shadow some distance away, and then the moisture once more filled his eyes. But he had secured the course, and while running lightly forward in chase, he tenderly wiped his eyes, gradually bringing them back to something more like their ordinary condition.

He had not run far in the wake of Uncle Jax, before he stopped short, with a grim execration. The negro was no longer in sight. He had vanished during one of those brief spells of wiping away the powder-born tears.

"Spotted me, most likely, and took to cover!" muttered the Ghost Detective—for lack of a more distinctive appellation—as he glared around without catching sight of the fugitive. "He couldn't have run so very far—he'll have to show up before long; and then I'll tackle you again, Uncle Jax! A little resting spell won't come so much amiss, after all—for my poor peepers, if not for myself!"

While grimly muttering thus, the Ghost Detective sunk down behind a friendly clump of bushes, where the shade would help to obscure his figure, while he could keep a tolerably close and thorough watch over the ground before him, somewhere on which he felt that Uncle Jax was lying in concealment.

"It's gone; dropped out when I was stealing up on that blessed old fraud of a nigger, I reckon," he muttered, after a hasty search in his pockets for a small pocket-mirror. "Confound the smarting! Feels as though the whole side of my face was missing! I'd like to take a look at it, but—Hello!"

He gave a start, then crouched lower in his covert, gazing as keenly and steadily through the mingling light and shadow as his watering eyes would permit, at a dimly seen, phantom-like shape, which at first glimpse he had fancied that of Uncle Jax taking to renewed flight.

"Not him, since it's coming this way!" the Ghost Detective muttered after a brief observation. "Not—ha! something mighty interesting going on out yonder, sure's you're a foot high!"

He saw the dark figure suddenly come to a halt, then move swiftly forward to drop upon its knees in a little patch of clear moonlight. He saw it lift something in its arms, then lower it again. He saw the dark figure handling something that sent out a brief flash in the moonlight, and a suspicion of the truth flashed upon his puzzled brain.

Cautiously he stole forth from his covert, placing another clump of bushes between himself and that kneeling shape. And just as he gained this second covert, he uttered a low grunt of mingled relief and vexation, for the dark figure rose erect, glancing around, the light of the moon falling plainly upon its face and figure.

"Young Elliston!" muttered the Ghost Detective, with a frown and an impatient clinching of his painted hands. "That's Uncle Jax at his feet, too! Reckon the old fool run himself into a fit of some sort, and Elliston stumbled upon him. So—he's took the same trail, has he?"

There was more of vexation than of relief in his muttered tones, though it was a consolation to discover how Uncle Jax had so suddenly escaped his vigilance. It seemed as though this counterfeit ghost looked upon the superstitious old negro as his especial game.

He was near enough to catch nearly every word that passed between Glenn Elliston and Uncle Jax after the negro was restored to consciousness, and despite his irritation at first, he listened with almost breathless eagerness. Once or twice he nodded his head in brisk approval as Elliston seemed to make a point, but much more frequent were his signs of disgust.

"You're a fool, young fellow!" he muttered, once. "You've got the right idea, but you don't know how to work it! If I could only chip in for five minutes, without wholly exposing my hand!"

But that he knew was impossible, and he smothered his impatience as best he could, lying low and watching, listening, with curiously commingling emotions.

Even before Glenn Elliston he discovered the

approach of that wild, weird being to whose bold daring Uncle Jax owed his escape from the grip of the infuriated moonshiners. A low, long whistle broke from his lips, barely loud enough for his own ears to catch, and his powder-smarting eyes opened widely as he watched the shaggy-haired mystery drawing nearer the two men.

"Are they blind? Will they never—That's it!" bending eagerly forward, his eyes glowing vividly as he saw Elliston grasp Uncle Jax and point toward the mysterious creature. "That's it! pin him down to it, young fellow! Right there you've got the whole clew, or I'm a blundering—The devil and all his imps!"

It was almost a howl of intense disgust that broke from his lips as he saw Uncle Jax leap upon Elliston with that frantic scream of real or admirably simulated terror—as he saw the two men men fall to the ground together in a struggling mass—as he saw the white-haired stranger start, stare for a moment, then turn and run swiftly toward the nearest cover.

"Don't you think it for a single instant, my fine fellow!" grated the Ghost Detective, as he crouched low down and ran swiftly off at a sharp angle, keeping his gaze riveted on that figure. "I want you, and what I want bad, I usually get, sooner or later! Go it, graybeard! There is a two-legged bloodhound on your track this time!"

He saw the stranger race swiftly from cover to cover, keeping as much as possible in the shadow cast by the trees. Saw him cast frequent glances backward as though anticipating pursuit.

"You're looking in the wrong direction, honey!" he muttered, with a grim hard laugh, as he glided as swiftly in a course that kept parallel to the one followed by his game. "Over this way lies your greatest peril. But keep it up—I'm not complaining!"

So certain was he of success that he felt more like a cat playing with a helpless mouse than one who still had a strong and dangerous prey to capture. He believed that his death-hunt was so near an end that nothing mortal could wrest the proud victory from his grasp. Yet a seemingly trifling accident was to foil him the next moment, just as he nerved himself to end the chase.

With his gaze still riveted upon that figure, he increased his pace until running at top speed. His foot struck on the end of a dead limb, whirling it around so as to catch his other foot as it swung forward—and with an involuntary cry of rage and pain, he felt himself flying headlong through the air!

He fell in a heap on the hard, dry ground, rolling over and over, the breath knocked out of his body and his senses all confused. Only for his striking first on his hands—only for his great muscular powers and training as a gymnast—that fall would almost certainly have killed or crippled him.

Even as it was, he only managed to lift his head long enough to catch one fleeting glimpse of his game—and as he fell back again it was with a panting curse of rage.

The graybeard heard his fall, and possibly caught sight of his floundering figure, for he was renewing his flight at greater speed, beard on shoulder as he glanced backward.

As quickly as possible the Ghost Detective gathered himself up, shaking himself together as best he could. He was stunned in a measure by the terrific shock. His brain seemed all turned upside down, whirling and buzzing as though a swarm of bees had been turned into his empty skull.

He was a man whom trifles could not daunt, but had the game been of less importance, he must have given way then and there.

"No bones broken that I see!" he muttered, dashing the dust from his eyes—dust that was thickly mingled with blood, though he failed to notice that in his excitement and confusion. "I'll get there yet! I've got him lined—if he don't double too quick!"

In that one dizzy glance, the Ghost Detective had marked the new course of flight adopted by the graybeard, and now, dizzily, unsteadily, staggering like a drunken man, gulping down the qualmish sensation that rose in his throat, he pressed forward, determined to conquer—resolved to win the great game into which he had entered with no ordinary degree of interest.

Fortune stood his friend in a greater degree than he had any right to anticipate. He found that his brain seemed to grow thicker and even less clear as he pressed on. Objects grew indistinct before his eyes, and more than once he was only kept from falling by a friendly bush or tree. Still he would not own up beaten. Still he pushed on with dogged stubbornness that seemed a part of his nature. He would not own defeat while he could lift a hand or drag one foot after the other.

Yes, it was a lucky chance rather than any good judgment on his own part that led him to a part of the river bank where he glanced around him with a sudden clearing of his confused faculties.

On the bank of the river, out where the full moon shed its clearest light, he beheld a human figure, moving rapidly to and fro, gesticulating

violently, more like a lunatic than an ordinary, sane person.

"Old Graybeard, by all that's holy!" panted the Ghost Detective, dropping quickly down behind a bush, his eyes filling with a lurid glow as he gazed out upon his recovered prey.

For such was indeed the case. By chance, or an overruling Providence as it seemed to him just then, he had stumbled across the game just as it began to seem that he had lost it for good and all.

"What more appropriate spot?" he muttered, his white teeth clicking sharply as a sweeping glance told him his surroundings. "What better spot than this? Surely the finger of fate is in it all!"

The river-bank at this point was high and almost perpendicular, the stream being compressed between contracted banks, running rapidly and noisily.

Less than half a mile below, at the first shallows, the corpse of the murdered detective had been discovered.

"It was somewhere about this spot that he must have come by his death," mused the Ghost Detective, watching with increased interest the movements of the graybeard. "Perhaps at this very point! Perhaps right where that—Ha!"

Eagerly he leaned forward, breathlessly he watched the strange actions of the graybeard.

Strange actions indeed, and yet there seemed to be a horrible sort of reality, of method in his madness.

The actions of a man who is bitterly angry against another; who is charging that other with some deed of wrong or treachery, with many a savage gesticulation, yet all in perfect silence so far as speech was concerned.

"A maniac, or—a great criminal," mentally muttered the Ghost Detective as he watched this strange scene.

Watched the graybeard as he menacingly drew near the bank of the river, wildly gesticulating, seemingly with passion increasing, with a growing anger that threatened to break all bonds with the passage of each moment. Watched him until—

Up rose one arm, going through the motions of aiming and firing, though the hand was empty, though it was directed at nothing tangible!

The next moment the strange being staggered back, both hands rising to his head, pressing it convulsively. Reeling, swaying, then sinking to one knee, a hand supporting his body, the other again flung out, again going through the motions of firing a pistol.

And then slowly, like one stunned or crippled, he dragged himself forward, pausing with an inarticulate growl of intensest rage beside a limb of dead wood. Dropping forward upon it, clutching it with both hands, growling and snarling, more like a ravening wild beast than aught human. Struggling to his feet with the limb in his arms. Reeling to the brink of the river-bank, casting the limb far out over the roaring water. Bending forward so far over the edge that the Ghost Detective started to his feet with a low cry of alarm, fearing lest the graybeard should topple over into the river.

Involuntary though that cry was, it seemed to reach the ears of the strange being, for instantly he straightened up and turned about, the bright moonlight falling full upon his bearded face, reflected from his glowing eyes.

The Ghost Detective knew that his presence was discovered, and expecting the madman—for such he surely must be—to take to renewed flight, he stepped briskly forward, nerving his muscles for a hand-to-hand struggle.

But, not a little to his surprise, the stranger made no effort to escape, showed no signs of fear or of anxiety. Instead, with arms folded across his full chest, he gazed placidly, mildly at the new-comer.

The detective hesitated, a little nonplused. His brain was not yet as clear as it might have been, only for that ugly fall, and though his suspicions had been strongly aroused by the peculiar movements of this stranger, he could not at once decide on the proper course to pursue. For past experience told him that many an important game had been lost by a single hasty, premature play.

"Like me, you find the night too gloriously beautiful for slumber, sir?" uttered the graybeard, his voice low and calm, even musical. "Like me, you are an ardent student of nature—nature unalloyed?"

The Ghost Detective was not a little taken aback by this wholly unexpected address. Surely these were not the words of a madman! And still less those of a foul assassin, surprised in the very act of rehearsing his dastardly crime?

He did not know what to say or do for a single moment. This reception was so different from that which he anticipated. Instead of a frantic effort to escape—in a desperate assault to put it out of his power to tell to mortal man the strange spectacle he had witnessed—a mild, poetical greeting like this!

"There is a charm in the moonlight—a soothing, satisfying yet exhilarating influence—don't you agree with me, sir?" softly added the gray-

heard, moving a trifle nearer to the bewildered detective as the words passed his lips.

The Ghost Detective noticed that movement, and like a flash his clearness of brain was restored to him. He scented danger of no uncommon sort in that action. It seemed so stealthy, so crafty, so insidious. It seemed to him like the treacherous purring of the hungry tiger as it crouches for its deadly leap!

Right or wrong, this thought armed him and placed him on his guard against this strange being. It drove that buzzing, confusing whirl from his brain, leaving him once more the cool, steel-nerved, man-hunter.

"Under more agreeable circumstances, I might agree with you, my dear sir," he said, lightly, laughing shortly. "But I must confess that I prefer the full light of the sun—particularly when I'm traveling in a strange region, as now."

"You are a stranger in these parts, then?" eagerly asked the other, with a curious glitter in his eyes as the moonlight fell athwart them. "You come here with a purpose? You are looking for something—for somebody, no doubt?"

Slowly the vague suspicions of the Ghost Detective were taking shape and substance. They were strengthened and confirmed by this question, uttered in such a peculiar tone of voice.

Surely fortune was favoring him! Surely chance was kind!

"I am a stranger in these parts, as you may readily imagine when I tell you that I have strayed most hopelessly from the trail I set out to follow," he uttered, with a laugh that seemed to be tinged just a trifle with shame and embarrassment.

"You are lost, then? It was chance that brought you to—this particular point? You were not—of course you were not looking for this spot," with a low, strange laugh, as he cast a swift, yet irresolute glance around them.

The Ghost Detective took advantage of this moment to slightly alter his position, bringing his face more completely into the shadow.

Slight as was his movement, and unaccompanied by any noise, it attracted the attention of the graybeard, and once more his glowing eyes were riveted upon the other.

"You are lost?" he repeated. "That is unfortunate!"

"Or might have been, only for this opportune meeting," quickly interjected the detective. "You are not lost? You are familiar with this region, no doubt?"

"I was—once!"

"Then you can direct me to my destination. I wish particularly to meet a gentleman named Milton Sarsfield. A friend of yours?"

Even as the question passed his lips, the detective felt a cold chill of disappointment flash over him. There was no such start as he had anticipated. No shrinking or hasty denial. Instead, a doubting, musing air of indecision. And then the graybeard slowly shook his head as he replied:

"Surely not a friend of mine! Surely not one of whom I have even heard, unless I failed to catch the words you pronounced!"

"Milton Sarsfield, I said," distinctly repeated the detective. "He lived near here at the time Pendy Rowell was murdered."

Was that a shiver agitating the frame of the graybeard as this last name was pronounced? Or was it only overstrained fancy?

The Ghost Detective could not answer this mental doubt satisfactorily to himself, and instantly resolved on a bolder move by which he might solve all doubts.

He remembered how carefully he had made up his face to resemble that of the murdered detective. He recalled how completely that make-up had deceived Uncle Jax. If his suspicions were true in this case, he felt confident that his scheme would work to perfection.

"I never heard of either name before this moment," slowly, steadily uttered the graybeard, again with that stealthy, covert slipping an inch or two nearer the detective.

"Your voice sounds familiar to my ears," said the detective, his hands disappearing beneath his cloak and fumbling with something hidden there. "I wonder where we have met before this night? Perhaps your memory may be better than mine. If so—you recognize my face?"

He flung open his cloak, letting that same ghastly blue light spring up to illumine his face. He forgot how blackened it had been by burning powder. Forgot the dust and blood which had dried in streaks over his countenance. Forgot that even Uncle Jax would not have recognized his face just then.

"I am Pendy Rowell, the man you—the man Milton Sarsfield murdered!" he thundered in passionate tones.

Then—it was ever a source of bewilderment to him—the graybeard was upon him with a snarl like that of a ravening wild beast!

The Ghost Detective struggled with desperation, but only to find himself like an infant in that mad grasp—only to feel himself carried to the river-bank, and then hurled far out over the churning waters!

CHAPTER XV.

A MOUNTAIN COURT IN SESSION.

It was John Mahar's voice that uttered those words, and John Mahar who covered Glenn Elliston with a cocked revolver to enforce them.

By the bright light of the suddenly unmasked lantern, the young man could see this—could see that a strong force was confronting him—that he had run headlong into a trap from which there was hardly a hope of escape with life.

Other lights were being lit by those of the party furthest from the door, this additional illumination plainly setting forth their overwhelming number, mutely warning the challenged to think twice before he threw his last chance away.

All this at a single glance. Then Glenn Elliston whipped forth a brace of revolvers, placing his back against the wall beside the open door, his voice ringing out clearly, defiantly:

"Fair play, gentlemen, or I'll eat my bigness through your crowd before you can down me for good and all! You, John Mahar: what does all this mean, anyhow?"

"It means pure business, Elliston," was the cold, almost harsh response from the gaunt mountaineer, as he unflinchingly faced the black muzzle of one of those ready revolvers. "It means that if you try to kick, you'll come out all the wuss off. It means that if you shed a single drop o' blood, salt cain't save you from sp'ilin'!"

While the chief of the moonshiners was speaking thus, Glenn was glancing rapidly over the faces now distinctly visible by the added lights. He recognized each and every one of them. All were of his neighbors, as neighbors go in rural regions. All were of men who had played a part in the capture of Uncle Jax on the night before.

A bright light flashed into his eyes as he noted this fact. He fancied this attempted arrest was due to the part he had played in that little drama, and his breath came much freer than it had while he remained in doubt.

"I don't want to fight unless I have to," he said, speaking in a more moderate tone, the muzzles of his weapons falling a trifle. "Swear to treat me white, and I'll surrender without burning a grain of powder. But first—what charge am I arrested on?"

"Fer sellin' out your neighbors to the cussed revenue men."

Elliston opened his eyes widely at this wholly unexpected answer. He could scarcely believe the evidence of his ears, yet John Mahar did not look like one who was lying or uttering a clumsy jest. His face was hard and stern, his eyes glowing, his tones cold and harsh. And the men who backed him up seemed to the full as resolute and in earnest.

"You can't really suspect me of any such black treachery as that! You can't think this abominable charge has any foundation in truth?"

"Prove yourself innocent, young man, an' we'll ax your pardon on our two knees. Ef you cain't—waal, as I said afore, salt won't save ye this time!"

"Swear that you'll treat me white, and I'll surrender," quietly added the young man, but still with his revolvers covering the moonshiners. "Refuse to pledge your sacred word of honor to this effect, and you can open the ball just as soon as you—Ah!"

A tall, lithe figure suddenly sprang in at the open door, and with a fierce, downright blow with clubbed revolver, felled the speaker to the floor, without uttering sound or cry of warning.

"There's your game, neighbors!" cried Bion Barnave, a savage triumph in his voice and glowing in his dark eyes as he stood over the prostrate figure, looking very much as though he would like nothing better than to make all sure by repeating his dastard stroke.

"Don't ye do it, Bion Barnave!" warningly grated John Mahar as he strode forward and pushed the spy back from his fallen rival. "You hit him one dirty lick, but you cain't hit him another while I'm to the fore—mind ye that, now!"

Barnave showed his teeth viciously, but made no resistance, contenting himself with saying:

"You let him face you all, and I chipped in with a higher trump than any you could show. There he is, quiet enough. Take him or leave him, just as you see fit. I've done my duty, without fear or favor."

"Freeze onto him!"

"Hitch a rope onto him, an' run him up a tree fer to ketch the fresh air!"

"Hang him fu'st, an' talk it over when we've got more time!"

Such were sample cries which arose from the excited and revengeful mountaineers, and John Mahar, who still had deep in his heart a positive liking for this handsome young fellow, turned from Bion Barnave to exert his authority before it was entirely over-ridden.

"Trial comes 'fore hangin' with us, neighbors," he said with cold sternness, one stride carrying him to the prostrate figure, over which he stood, revolvers in hand. "I promised him a fair trial, an' that he's gwine to hev, ef I hev to fight fer it! You hear me talk?"

"We ain't got no time nor money to waste in trials," doggedly muttered Mark Tappan, with an ugly light in his sunken eyes. "We'd be wuss then fools to give him up to the lawyers when we've got sech a dead-sart'in bulge onto the critter!"

"When I say trial, I mean trial afore a court o' our own makin'," quickly interposed John Mahar, as that ominous growl began to swell and spread through his fellows. "We kin try the case, an' we kin give him as fair a shake as he could git in the highest court in all the land, I reckon. How is that, neighbors?"

"Bet we kin!"

"An' hang him a mighty sight sooner!"

"Ef he's found guilty as charged, of course," promptly amended Mahar, with a cordial laugh, satisfied that he had gained his point.

Glenn Elliston was beginning to stir uneasily. A moaning sound escaped his lips as strong hands closed upon him, and he visibly winced as John Mahar gently probed the scalp wound upon his skull, to assure himself that no bones had been broken by that cruel blow from behind.

This fear was quickly allayed, and in a few minutes more, Glenn Elliston was sitting up in a chair, his hands free, but his weapons removed, ready to be tried for his life.

He fully realized this fact now. Knowing those strong, stern, matter-of-fact men as well as he did, one comprehensive glance told him so much. Told him that unless he could fairly convince them of his complete innocence, his fate was almost certainly sealed.

Yet he did not betray any great amount of uneasiness. He knew that Bion Barnave would hesitate at nothing in order to remove him from his path, but conscious of his own innocence, he felt confident that he would come out with flying colors in the end.

"You reckon you're stiddy-headed enough fer to defend yourself, Elliston?" gravely asked John Mahar, who had by common consent, as it seemed, taken the position of presiding judge. "We don't want to take any onmanly advantage o' anybody. We jest want to git at the bottom facts, to pardon or punish a'cordin'ly."

"I'm all right. It takes more than the stroke of a coward—of a craven who dares strike only from behind—to unsteady my brain," was the prompt response.

The words were accompanied by a stern, menacing glance toward Bion Barnave, who snappily shrugged his shoulders in silence.

Grave, pale-faced, his greenish-gray eyes glowing vividly, John Mahar rose to his feet like a judge pronouncing the sentence of a convicted criminal, his tones steady and measured.

"Young man, you know jest how we are fixed in these parts. You hev bin here long enough to know that we are all of us, more or less, doin' what this new-fangled law says is wrong. I ain't goin' to argy that p'int jest now, fer they ain't no time, nor any one to take the contrary side, unless it is you."

"You know all this, I say. You know that ef we cain't make whisky, we cain't g't along 'thout starvin' the biggest bafe o' the time. An' knowin' this, you kin see how bitter black it looks to us fer anybody to sell us out to the revenue sharks."

"If I am accused of being such a traitor, right here and right now, I want to brand that person an infamous liar!" sharply interposed Glenn Elliston, his face paling, his eyes flashing fire.

"That's no more'n I expected you to say," coldly uttered Mahar, with just the shadow of a frown upon his gaunt features. "An' no longer ago then the day jest passed, I'd 'a' swore to the truth o' them words, even afore they passed your lips. But now—"

"You dare not doubt my word, even now!" impetuously.

"But now it's heap different," added Mahar, paying no attention to that sharp interruption save by a deepening frown. "Now thar's a charge laid ag'in' ye that makes that mighty doubtful, to say the least. Now they's sworn charges placed ag'in' you that hev got to be met an' explained an' cl'ared away, ef you hope to see another sun!"

"Those charges are lies, without foundation in fact, if they pretend to brand me as a spy and informer. Who is my accuser? Let him stand forth and repeat his vile lies to my face!"

As he spoke, hotly, impetuously, Glenn Elliston gazed defiantly into the dark, bruised face of Bion Barnave, as though feeling confident none other present would dare accuse him thus; but the spy of the moonshiners said nothing, did nothing, only smiled softly and derisively.

"The witnesses won't be lackin' when the proper time comes, young 'man," gravely uttered John Mahar. "Ef you kin face 'em down as easy as you 'pear to think, so much the better fer your neck!"

Elliston broke into a short, hard laugh.

"It is clear enough that you have already judged and condemned me in your own minds, but that can't shake me. I've done nothing of which I'm ashamed. I've committed no crime, least of all against those who have been my neighbors, and who have: until now, treated me as white and free born."

"Then you hain't bin actin' in secret as a spy

fer the revenue sharks? You hain't bin takin' thar money fer betrayin' our secrets? You hain't tuck money fer tellin' 'em whar they could find our little stills?" deliberately asked John Mahar, his eyes closely noting the face of the prisoner, as though seeking to read the whole truth therein instead of depending on mere words.

Glenn Elliston flushed hotly, his eyes all aglow as he replied:

"Once more I say that I have done nothing of the kind."

"You are ready to take oath you never tuck a commission makin' you a spy on us, fer the secret service?"

"I never did."

"Nur yit you never writ out a close 'scription of whar our stills lay, an' the best way to git to them in the dark an' 'thout a guide?"

"Once more, no!" with angry distinctness.

Glenn Elliston turned a shade paler as he caught the low, deadly muttering sound that ran through the room, but he unflinchingly met the fierce, deadly frowns that were turned upon him from one and all. All save John Mahar. He was grave and cold, his gaunt face showing a little harder, harsher than ordinary; but that was all.

Without a word he turned away from the table which stood between himself and the prisoner. He passed out of doors, quickly returning with Lafe Dawson in charge.

The hot, angry flush died out of Glenn Elliston's face as he first caught sight of the witness, and noted the sullen, hang-dog expression upon his usually florid countenance. And a low, mocking laugh from the lips of Bion Barnave told plainly enough that at least one pair of unfriendly eyes had noted that paling, interpreting it unfavorably.

John Mahar stood with one sinewy hand grasping Lafe Dawson by the shoulder, forcing him to face the accused. His voice was cold and warning at the same time, as he spoke:

"You hain't changed your mind, young man? You still stick to it you ain't guilty o' whar's bin charged ag'inst ye! Take time an'—"

"It needs no time, sir!" cried Elliston, stung by that mocking yet exultant laugh from the lips of his rival. "I am no spy. I am no informer. I have never betrayed a secret of yours. Not because I hold you are blameless in breaking the laws of the land, for—"

An angry outburst drowned his voice, and for a few moments it seemed as though the angry moonshiners would leap upon and tear him limb from limb. Glenn Elliston evidently anticipated some such rush, for he sprang to his feet, his handsome countenance all aglow, his gray eyes flashing proud defiance. That was all. He made no attempt to escape. He even folded his arms across his swelling chest, knowing how worse than vain would be any fight against such a rush.

This bold defiance was not without its influence over the moonshiners, for they naturally liked a bold, fearless man. But it was the power of John Mahar as their regularly elected chief and guide that held them back.

"Slow an' stiddy, lads!" he cried sternly, facing the angry gathering with armed hands motioning them back. "They ain't no sech mighty rush. They's time a-plenty fer settlin' this case in a decent an' orderly manner. Keep back, or some o' you'll git it right in the neck!"

He turned to Glenn Elliston, replacing his weapons as he added in a cold reproving tone of voice:

"An' you, young feller, hed better take a little o' the same advice home to your own self. It ain't wise work to pull the tail of a hungry tiger when you hain't got no room to dodge or jump or run. You ain't so big a fool you can't see this."

"What difference will it make in the end?" cried Elliston, with a scornful outflinging of one hand, his lips curling as he glanced over those dark, scowling, menacing faces. "You are all determined to murder me, no matter how positively I may swear to my innocence. Then the least satisfaction I can get is to speak out my mind without reserve."

"Ef you're innocent, your life is jest as safe here as it would be in a reg'lar court o' law," was the grave response. "But ef you're guilty as charged, all heaven an' hell can't save your neck from gittin' stretched the wu'st way!"

"So your lips say, but I read a vastly different verdict in the faces of these honest gentlemen, our neighbors," with a short, hard laugh that contained mingled defiance and scorn. "But go on with the dance! At least, you'll not have it to say that you made me flinch! A man I've lived and a man I'll die!"

"Tell your story, Lafe Dawson, jest as nigh like you told it afore as the truth 'll let ye," sternly uttered John Mahar, releasing the witness after squaring him about so that he stood face to face with the man he accused of being a spy and an informer. "It all lays atween you two, an' both can't come out top o' the heap. May the good Lord hev mercy on the critter that goes down afore the other—fer we won't!"

Sharply, almost savagely came the concluding words, and not one within the reach of his voice but fully comprehended his meaning. One of

the twain was almost surely doomed to the rope.

For an instant Lafe Dawson tried to brave that steady, stern gaze, but in vain. Despite his utmost efforts to the contrary, his eyes were forced to sink, his florid face turning a sickly, sallow hue.

But he told his story without a serious break, and just as he had given it to the moonshiners before they were startled by the clatter of hoofs, which they erroneously believed heralded the return of Glenn Elliston, but which proved to be Bion Barnave instead.

There is no need of repeating the charges he made, since a glance backward will furnish all that is essential. Enough that he made his recital as strong and telling against his employer as he well could without too plainly amplifying his former story.

Steadily Glenn Elliston watched him as he spoke. Pale, hard-set, his face gave no further evidence of emotion. And when Lafe Dawson stopped short in his evidence, shrinking visibly from the deep, menacing growl which broke from the lips of the moonshiners, a smile of scorn came into his handsome face as he boldly, unflinchingly cast back those threatening looks.

"What answer hev you got to give to it so fur?" demanded John Mahar, a troubled light growing in his gray eyes as he once more succeeded in quelling the threatened outbreak.

"Nothing more than I have already said," was the cold, composed response. "It is all a lie, from the lips of a liar, instigated by another liar who is too cowardly to utter the black falsehoods with his own lips! If you want a name, I can give it readily enough."

John Mahar frowned uneasily, pushing the tips of his long beard in between his nipping teeth. There was something in the powerful contrast between the demeanor of witness and accused that was rapidly unforming the opinion he had formed concerning the case. Dawson looked far more like a knave than his employer. Surely Glenn Elliston would have shown some signs of fear and discomfiture unless he had a perfect consciousness of innocence to back him up?

And if innocent—if not guilty of these heavy charges brought against him—what would be the result? Could he hold back the moonshiners? Could he keep them from lynching their captive, innocent or not?

"Go on an' tell the rest o' your story," he slowly uttered, with a frowning nod to Lafe Dawson.

"Make him quit scowling so at me, then," muttered the witness, shifting to the other foot, furtively brushing away the cold sweat that stood out upon his brow. "It's hard enough fer to tell all this ag'inst a man whar's al'ays treated me mighty kind an' white—"

"To be sold to a shameful death in return for a few dollars!" the prisoner cried with sudden heat, as he leaned across the table and held up one warning finger. "Tell the truth for once in your worthless life, Lafe Dawson! Tell the truth—tell these honorable gentlemen how many dollars Bion Barnave gave or promised you for swearing my life away! Speak, you cringing cur!"

Bion Barnave sprang forward with a cry of suffocating rage, only to be met by John Mahar revolver in hand.

"Keep your clothes on, young man! You kin hev your say when the right time comes, but that time ain't come now. Simmer down, an' take a walk!"

For a brief space it seemed as though a collision must take place between the two men, but then, with a short, hard laugh, Bion Barnave turned on his heel and passed out through the still open door.

John Mahar turned once more to Lafe Dawson, saying sternly:

"Go on with the story you told us. Ef you're tellin' nothin' more then the truth, bar' looks cain't faze ye much. An' even ef he was fool enough fer to try wuss, he couldn't hurt ye much with his naked han's afore we would make him let up."

Glenn Elliston laughed shortly, bitterly, as he cried:

"It isn't physical fear that unnerves the rascal. It's the knowledge that he is trying to swear away the life of an innocent man for a villainous scoundrel's money that makes him shiver and cow!"

"Your time to speak'll come soon enough, Glenn Elliston," gravely interposed John Mahar, that troubled light deepening in his eyes as they watched that indignant, scornful face, so wholly unlike that of a guilty wretch, brought face to face with his sins and their grave consequences. "Let Dawson tell his story, an' then you kin pick it to pieces as best the truth'll let ye."

"That is all I ask," calmly returned the accused, refolding his arms and falling back into his chair. "Go on, Dawson. Tell your story, and then these gentlemen shall judge between the right and the wrong."

"It ain't no money that makes me blow on ye," with a sullen, covert glance that drooped as quickly as it began. "I never said a word but to deny it all, ontel they swore they'd swing me higher'n a kite ef I didn't spit out the hull truth!"

"It isn't the truth I'm objecting to, Dawson; but pray go on, and get it over with as soon as your instructions will permit," was the cold retort.

"They ain't so much more to tell," muttered the witness, brushing a trembling hand across his brow. "Time an' time ag'in the boss got to talkin' to me, in a mighty 'sterious way as I thought from the fu'st. He told me all about the findin' of that dead man, an' how they was big money into it ef anybody could p'int out the right trail to the cend."

"Still I didn't ketch on, but one day 'bout a week afore Owen Tredgold was 'rested fer the murder, he spoke out too plain fer even a dumb fool like me to make any funder mistakes."

"Go on an' tell just what he said to you," sharply uttered John Mahar, as the witness hesitated, choking down a rising in his throat.

"He come to me an' held out a wad o' bills, axin' me ef I didn't want to make a strike like that? I said I wouldn't mind, or somethin' o' the sort; I cain't tell now jest what I did say. Anyway, it wasn't nothin' to skeer him off, fer he come out flat-footed an' said he'd give me two hundred dollars ef I'd agree to make cath that. I saw Owen Tredgold kill Pen'cy Rowell an' pitch him into the river!"

With an angry cry Glenn Elliston sprang to his feet, but his voice was quickly drowned by the mad yell that broke from the lips of the infuriated moonshiners—a yell that thirsted for his life-blood!

CHAPTER XVI.

IN PERIL OF HIS LIFE.

"BACK, neighbors!" cried John Mahar, with a swift leap reaching the side of the accused, a cocked revolver filling each hand, covering each one of the infuriated moonshiners in turn as they swept steadily back and forth. "I've passed my word to the lad, an' ef you make me break that, you've got to climb over me as well! Back, or I'll shoot to kill!"

Only one man, but that was enough to check the rush for an instant. Enough to give time for a second appeal.

"We're jedges, not murderers, an' as sech we've got a right to let the 'cused tell his side o' the story. You know me. You know that when I say ef he cain't prove his title clear, I'll be the fu'st one to grab the rope, it's no lie. An' you know me well enough to bet heavy that when I say you cain't hang him 'thout trial while I'm livin', it's good as sworn to. Back—an' keep your clothes on, neighbors!"

Only one man, but that man was John Mahar. They did know him from top to toe. Rough, rude, ignorant, it might be, but a man of his word, no matter whether that word was given to friend or foe. A man who would die like a bulldog, making his teeth meet in the flesh. A man who would face an army without stopping to count the odds, when once he felt convinced right and justice was on his side.

"Give him a tetch o' whar he putt up fer Owen Tredgold!"

"The man who dares even hint that I ever worked wrong against Owen Tredgold, by word, deed or thought, is a liar in his throat!" coldly and clearly cried Glenn Elliston, his eyes flashing defiance, his arms folded closely over his swelling bosom.

"Be durned ef I don't begin to b'lieve it, too!" impulsively cried John Mahar, with dangerous frankness, as the increasing growl and darkening scowls gave evidence. "Don't jump out o' your boots, neighbors," he added hastily, with a short, grim laugh as he noticed this. "It was only by lookin' from the face o' the witness to that o' the 'cused that fetched them words to my lips. Right or wrong, I'm goin' by the evidence, an' that's whar's got to guide you, too. Don't scowl an' say you've hearn enough. We hain't hearn whar Elliston hes to say yit!"

"He'll make black look white, durn his slippery tongue!"

"Ef we cain't tell the difference, then I don't reckon we're fit fer jedgin' as to the guilt or innocence o' a feller human," sharply retorted John Mahar, beginning to breathe more freely once more.

He knew from past experience that when a mob hesitates it is lost. Unless the first few moments of such a crisis be promptly improved, it is not very difficult for a strong-nerved, ready-tongued man to win a victory such as this.

"Guilt be durned!" exploded blunt Mark Tappan, his hard features full of mingled disgust and indignation. "Hain't we got it writ down in plain black an' white, let alone whar Dawson told us? Ain't them papers plenty 'nough fer to hang a dozen, each one heap more white then that crooked cuss? Waal, I should remark."

"If you have papers that pretend to prove me false to you, my neighbors, I pronounce them vile forgeries at the send-off!" impetuously cried Elliston, losing much of his former coolness, and thereby endangering his safety all the more.

It was an unlucky remark just then. John Mahar frowned darkly as the words reached his ears. Better for Glenn Elliston had he waited to examine those papers before so positively branding them as forgeries.

"Don't you chip in so lively, young man!" he

said, his brows contracting, his greenish-gray eyes glowing vividly. "You shell hev your time to talk, never doubt it; but jest now it's Lafe Dawson to the fore. Lafe, you critter! le's hear the tail eend o' your evidence, man!"

"They ain't much more to tell," sulkily muttered the witness, still far from feeling at ease beneath that steady, contemptuous gaze. "I was knocked all of a heap when he talked to me like that, though I still made sure he was foolin'. I sorter tuck it in a jokin' way, but that wouldn't do. He come out still plainer, pinnin' me down ontel I hed to say right out that I couldn't an' wouldn't take no sech oath, that I wasn't anywhars nigh this county when the detective was killed; that I'd told more'n one this was the fu'st time I ever hit the region, which they'd be sure to 'member as much, an' then whar'd I be?"

"He stuck to me tight, did the boss, sayin' he'd fix that up all right, an' keepin' at it, pili'n up his bids ontel I begun fer to look skeery. He was so powerful in airnest that I couldn't help seein' it. Ontel then I looked at it as only a sort o' curious joke, like, but that wouldn't answer no longer. An' so, the easiest way I could I told him I wouldn't touch the matter with a ten-foot pole."

"He didn't try to make you sw'ar to keep his secret, then?" slowly asked John Mahar, a puzzled, doubting look coming into his face.

Lafe Dawson flashed a swift glance up at his face, and muttered:

"He turned it off as a joke. Mebbe he thought it wouldn't fay in well with thet idee, ef he used threats or sech. Anyway, he never even axed me to keep it mum."

"But you done it, all the same," growled Mark Tappan.

Dawson shrugged his shoulders, a shrewd light coming into his eyes.

"Why not? It was the law that tuck hold o' Owen Tredgold, an' ef the law said he was guilty, all my talkin' wouldn't prove nothin' different. I mebbe did consid'able thinkin', but I held my tongue; an' I'd 'a' bin holdin' of it yet only fer yer pinchin' me so mortal tight!"

"No doubt it was terribly hard to get you to speak!" sneered the accused, as Dawson half-turned toward him while uttering the last words.

"Why wouldn't it be?" with a sudden outburst of what seemed genuine emotion. "You've treated me clean white ever sence I come to these parts. I hain't one thing to lay up ag'inst you, but—"

Glenn Elliston flung out one hand with hot impatience as he said:

"Choke him off, or make him keep strictly to what he calls his testimony, will you? Don't add insult to injury, by permitting that cur to slobber all over me, while doing his level best to twist a rope for my neck!"

Dawson caught his breath with a suspicious sniff.

"I ain't blamin' of him, gents! I reckon it do look rather tough; but what could I do? It was talk or croak, an' I hed to talk!"

"Go on an' git through with it, then," muttered Mahar, whose face once more showed conflicting doubts.

"They ain't no more to say. The boss never mentioned the matter ag'in to me, nur I to him."

"Then you kin fall back. Boys," with a glance over his shoulder, "some o' you keep a eye on Dawson, will ye, in case he's needed ag'in."

John Mahar faced the prisoner, his countenance clouded, grave and anxious. His first hot rage had died out. His first fierce belief was growing into a doubt that caused him to the full as much pain.

There was much depending upon him, in that affair. He had been chosen leader, tacitly if not by word of mouth or by ballot in a more formal fashion. It would fall to his lot to sentence the prisoner, should the evidence show him guilty as charged. His lips were the ones to declare him innocent, in case the evidence proved too weak to convict him of treachery and worse; but then what? Could he carry his men with him? Could he make them look through the same eyes? Could he keep them from quenching their mad, unreasoning thirst with blood?

This was the point that troubled him the worst, just now.

"Elliston, I'd hate mightily to hev to b'lieve you sech a dirty whelp an' cur as Lafe Dawson hes swore you, but I'm free to confess that things looks mighty black ag'inst you—mighty black!"

"I declare, on honor, that not one word of truth has passed his lips this night in my hearin'!" impetuously cried Elliston, his face pale, but his gray eyes glowing until they shone almost redly in the lamplight. "You have his word for, and my oath against; believe the one you think most worthy belief!"

"Lafe's neck ain't got a rope twisted 'round it, an' yours hes!" Mark Tappan bluntly interposed, with a sour grin.

A low muttering ran through the group of moonshiners, telling how strongly this apt illustration as to the value of evidence struck them. Elliston heard it, and had no difficulty in right-

ly interpreting its meaning. Still he did not flinch an atom. If anything, his attitude, his demeanor, became even more defiant than before.

"All the more reason why I should guard my lips from a lie," he promptly retorted. "It brings me low enough to be obliged to answer the barefaced falsehoods uttered by such a miserable cur, but life is dear to the bravest of us, and I do not pretend to be anxious for death—least of all, death by the rope. Still—and I say this to you as man to man, a neighbor to neighbor—I would ten thousand times rather suffer death by a rope in your hands than save my life by a lie as foul and unfounded as those just uttered by Lafe Dawson!"

"Talk is cheap, an' a tongue grows mighty limber when they's a life hangin' onto the eend of it," slowly uttered John Mahar, taking from his breast the paper which he saw him discover in the tin box found in the secret recess revealed by Lafe Dawson. "Will you jest run your two eyes over this bit o' paper, an' tell us what it means?"

A single glance was sufficient to inform Elliston of its nature and contents, and his face turned white as that of a corpse as he realized the peril which threatened him now. White, but with a deadly rage, not from fear.

"That is a forgery, false as hell itself!" he uttered, his voice hard and strained. "It is a detective's commission, but it never was mine, never was in my possession for an instant. If not a forgery in itself, it is in answer to a forgery, since I never applied for such a commission, was never offered it, nor would I have accepted it under any consideration whatever."

John Mahar silently strode across the room, lifting the mirror and opening the secret door, keenly watching the accused as he did so.

Elliston followed his movements with blazing eyes, and gave a sudden start as he saw the cunning hiding-place laid bare.

"You found the paper in there, and Lafe Dawson told you where to look?" he exclaimed, with proudly-curling lips. "That *does* settle it!"

"Then you own up to what it says?" sharply demanded Mahar.

"I never own up to a lie," was the cold, contemptuous retort. "I was simply puzzled to see how you would explain your possession of that forgery, for I could hardly believe *you* were fallen so low, John."

Mahar flushed, and his eyes dropped for an instant at that cutting retort, all the more severe from the touch of melancholy which accompanied the words.

"Dawson swore he saw you hide it thar. He swore he one time come 'crost a paper writ by your own han', tellin' jest whar our different stills was located, an' the easiest way to git at 'em."

"And how did he explain his inability to produce that important paper?" quickly interposed Elliston, his eyes flashing. That might be of some importance, since no doubt there is more than one gentleman now present who has seen specimens of my handwriting. Why is not this writing presented to the court as evidence?"

"He says you got it back ag'in."

"Bought it, no doubt, even as I tried to buy his oath against Owen Tredgold—Bah!" with sudden impatience. "If you can place any credence in what he says, all I can offer is worthless, since I have only truth and honesty to back me up!"

There was a sudden bustle at the door, and Bion Barnave shouldered his way through his fellows, his bruised face lit up with a hard, merciless glow of triumph as he flung an open paper on the table before John Mahar, speaking rapidly:

"I reckon it's time for me to put in a word, gentlemen. There's a paper of precisely the same purport as the one described by Dawson. I found it in town, in the possession of Major Burke, chief of the Revenue Secret Service. I saw at a glance how important it might turn out to you, and stole it. Use it as best you know how!"

John Mahar caught up the paper, though a score of hands were outstretched in an eager attempt to be the first. He glanced rapidly over the closely written lines, his brows contracting and his face growing hard as flint as he read. Truly this seemed proof irrefragable.

"Hold to that paper, John Mahar!" cried Elliston, with almost savage energy as he pulled open a drawer in the table at which he stood, bringing forth a bound book, a stylographic pen and some paper. "I will write a few lines under your own eyes, and sign my name. In this book you will find that I have daily kept the accounts of this place, with other personal matters. Compare my writing, freshly made, with that in this book, and see if they differ materially. Then compare both with the lines on the paper you hold in your hand!"

"Is it so hard to disguise one's handwriting?" sneered Barnave.

"You seem ready enough to answer your own question, you villain!" with sharp contempt, even as his pen glided rapidly over the paper. "Why not, since, as I firmly believe, you forged both of those papers in hopes of ruin-

He passed both paper and book to John Mahar, who carefully compared first the two former, then each of them with the writing on the document produced in evidence by Bion Barnave. He could detect a certain dim resemblance between the writing in the latter, and the others, but this was no stronger than might possibly have happened with other specimens taken up at random.

"Ef the same hand writ them, the man that done it tried to disguise his way o' handlin' the pen," was his decision, at length.

"Of course!" cried Barnave, with a disagreeable laugh. "Would he care about publishing his treachery to the whole world?"

"Would he be such an arrant fool as to leave such a document lying carelessly about where a fellow like Dawson could get sight of it?"

"Every rogue makes a slip in time."

"As you have made yours, by exposing your hand so prematurely, Bion Barnave!" was the swift retort. "Gentlemen, you can readily imagine why this fellow has trumped up these charges against me. You know that he thinks he has bitter cause to regret my coming back to the home of my boyhood. I name no names, for good and sufficient reasons, but not one of those who are within hearing but understands well what I allude to."

"You lie in your—"

A panther-like leap, a swift blow straight from the shoulder, with the weight of his body added to it, sent Bion Barnave endlong across the room and out through the open door.

As rapidly Glenn Elliston recovered himself, standing proudly erect, his arms folding over his heaving chest, his gray eyes glowing like balls of steel as he confronted the startled, angered crowd.

"That is my answer to yonder lying cur, gentlemen!" rung out that clear, distinct voice. "To you, I simply declare my innocence of each and every charge brought against me by those two lying scoundrels. I swear by high heaven that I have never informed against one of you. I pledge you my word as a man and neighbor, that I never took a commission as a detective in the Secret Service or any other. I swear that I never wrote that paper; that I never knew of yonder hiding-place in the wall; that I never brought a charge, secret or open, against Owen Tredgold—as why should I?"

"The time has come when in justice to myself I must speak out plainly, and there is not an honest person in the county who will or who can blame me for so doing."

"You all know that Bion Barnave and myself have been courting Miss Tredgold. You may not know how we fared, but I'll tell you. Miss Tredgold is now my promised wife, and her father has given his free consent to our marriage. He says that he knows of nothing which could give him more happiness."

"Granting this—and I call on him to witness the perfect truth of my assertion—why would I be such a fool, such a devilish rascal, as to seek his death? Is it not preposterous on the very face of it?"

"On the other hand, Bion Barnave told his love, only to be firmly rejected. He swore to get even—Miss Tredgold will bear me out in this. Owen Tredgold heard of this, and bluntly threatened to make his heels break his neck if he ever caught him prowling about his place again. Right there you have a clew to this foul charge, trumped up at this late day against as true and noble a gentleman as there can be found in the whole length and breadth of the land!"

"I charge Bion Barnave with being the anonymous accuser of Owen Tredgold! With being the secret informer who—"

There came a pistol shot, and with a gasping cry Elliston reeled back, falling heavily. Bion Barnave sprang in at the open door, crying:

"Talk enough! Hang the informer! Down all who dares to stand up for the secret spy! You, John Mahar!"

His pistol snapped, but flinging it with too true aim, the gaunt mountaineer was felled to the floor, and then, with wild, infuriated yells, the moonshiners pounced upon the bleeding form of their victim, dragging him out through the open door into the clear moonlight, Bion Barnave at their head.

"I only aimed to stun the rascal, but living or dead, up a tree he goes!" cried the exultant spy, bending over his helpless victim. "Hurrah!" leaping to his feet and yelling aloud in savage glee. "He's well enough for stretching a rope! I only barked the top of his head!"

"Le's git it over with afore Mahar comes to himself ag'in, then, or they'll be holy fun in a bushel measure right thar!" spluttered Mark Tappan, adding his grip to those which hauled Glenn Elliston out of the yard and across the road to the nearest tree large enough for their desperate purpose.

There was little time cut to waste, but rapidly as they worked, they were fated to be too late. There came the clatter of hoofs on the rocky road, and while still some distance off, the moonshiners recognized the rider with loud cries and cheers of mingled wonder and joy!

Owen Tredgold! And not a single minute too soon for Elliston!

"Hold!" and a brace of revolvers emphasized

his words. "I'll kill the first man who dares harm my boy! Who's at the head of all this? Show him to me! Push him to the front, will you?"

But when they looked for Bion Barnave, he had vanished!

CHAPTER XVII.

BION BARNAVE'S LAST TRUMP.

BION BARNAVE was one, if not the very first to recognize the coming horseman, and in that same instant he knew that his carefully laid plans had gone wrong beyond the mending. One brief breath of desperate doubt—of mentally debating whether or no he should not stick it out; his brain as swiftly reckoning the chances for and against his success; counting the risk of shooting Owen Tredgold down as he came speeding up, claiming it an unfortunate mistake by which a friend died in place of one attempting to rescue their prisoner.

Only for an instant. He knew that this would most assuredly end in his own weight stretching the rope now twisted about the neck of his hated rival. There was still a chance remaining, if he could only steal away during the confusion and excitement!

All other eyes were turned in the direction of the coming horseman. The moonshiners had already recognized their idolized chief, and in those moments of wild excitement, they had thoughts and eyes for nothing else save Owen Tredgold.

A swift, stealthy leap carried Bion Barnave under cover, and then with rapid steps he hastily increased the distance between him and the tree which he had hoped to ornament with the most frightful of fruit.

He scowled blackly as he caught the loud, glad cheers that came from the moonshiners as they were rejoined by their leader whom they had well-nigh given up as doomed to suffer death.

"The fickle curs!" he grated, snapping his teeth together with all the viciousness of a wolf. "One minute ago I was their god! Now—if they could, they'd be only too ready to run me up by the neck in place of Glenn Elliston—curses rest upon his head!"

He was out of ordinary earshot, and anticipating pursuit, or at least a search for him, Bion Barnave increased his pace until he was running at more than half-speed through the night.

Not in mad terror. Not aimless'y. But with a clear, well-defined end in view.

"I've got one trump card left!" he muttered through his clinched teeth as, with all the art of a practiced runner, he squared his shoulders, inflated his chest, and headed direct for his distant goal. "I'll play that for all I'm worth. If it takes the trick, all right. If not—well, time enough to choose between my own bullet and their rope!"

Bion Barnave was no fool, if his mad love for Lida Tredgold and his madder jealousy of Glenn Elliston had forced him to act with dangerous boldness. He knew that now Owen Tredgold had escaped—for his release from prison could only be accounted for in some such manner—and was at liberty, the truth must come out, and the mountaineers learn to know him for what he really was.

There was a good deal of truth in the countercharges uttered by Glenn Elliston when placed on trial for his life before the mountain court. By simply altering the names and actions of one to the other, pretty much all were explained.

Bion Barnave had threatened Lida Tredgold in his fierce disappointment born of her firm rejection. She mentioned this to her father, who sternly warned the moonshiner spy to keep away from the place, under penalty of a severe thrashing.

Knowing that he already had the countenance and well wishes of the mother, Bion Barnave caught at the first chance of getting the father out of the way, feeling that then he would have a far better chance of winning this proud beauty who laughed his love to scorn. And playing a double part as he had been doing from the very start; serving both the moonshiners and the revenue officers as spy; it was no very difficult matter for him to procure one who was willing to bear witness against Owen Tredgold, for a goodly consideration. And it was almost as easy for him, under specious pretenses, to have the matter kept as dark as possible while the preliminaries were under way.

At the same time Bion Barnave was plotting coolly, systematically, for the ruin of his successful rival in love. He found an easily purchased tool in Lafa Dawson, and carefully tutored him in the evidence he was to give, as well as his manner of delivering it in order to make it the most effectual. With his aid, the hiding-place was constructed during the absence of Glenn Elliston, and the paper concealed.

It was for the express purpose of denouncing Glenn Elliston as a Secret Service spy and furnishing partial proof of his charge, that led Bion Barnave to call together the mountaineers at their secret place of meeting in the little glen where we met them in our first chapter. He was just on the point of denouncing his successful rival when the unceremonious appearance of Andrew Turtle effectually upset his plans for the time being.

Instantly the suspicion that this person was one of the men whom he had learned were to be sent out in quest of further information, struck the spy, and opened his eyes to the risk he was running in playing such an intricate double game.

If this was indeed a spy in the Secret Service, and he had heard all that had passed his lips during the last few minutes, he must never be permitted to escape to detail his discoveries. It was on a forlorn hope that his face might as yet have escaped close scrutiny that led Bion Barnave to springing outside the circle of firelight, and to his guiding what followed without exposing himself to those keen eyes. And when the hairy disguise was torn from the face of Andrew Turtle, making it almost positive he was a spy on the moonshiners, Bion Barnave felt that his own safety demanded the capture or death of this fellow.

The failure to effect either, was the first break in his carefully forged chain; but since then, everything seemed to have gone wrong. And this strange, unexpected return of Owen Tredgold put the cap-sheaf on!

"Yelp on, you curs!" grated the unmasked villain, casting a brief glance over his shoulder as the faint, far-away sound of angry, vengeful yells came to his ears on the favoring breeze. "A few minutes ago you were ready to follow me to the gates of Hades itself! Now you are ravening for my heart's blood! Come and take it—but work mighty lively, or I'll fool ye all yet!"

Bion Barnave was heading direct for his own home, taking the shortest course, though that led over a rough, broken, difficult tract of ground, trying even for an athlete like himself. Still, he knew that this was his sole chance. Had he attempted to reach his horse and take to flight on its back, discovery would have come far too speedily for any chance of escape.

"They'd have smoked me right off!" he muttered, his unusually active brain leaping from one subject to another with feverish speed. "Even if luck favored me in dodging their bullets, they'd have jumped critters and pressed me too mighty close for this new rigging to work as it'll work now—as it *must* work!" with a hissing, vicious oath.

Up the hill and down the slope the Secret Service spy dashed, only pausing now and then to moisten his parched lips with water caught up from spring or brook. He was playing his last card in that intricate game for love and revenge and he could not afford to lose a single moment: one minute lost or gained might make all the difference between complete defeat and at least partial success.

"If nothing more, I'll have a sup of vengeance!" he panted, pausing to catch breath when on the hill from whence he could catch his first glimpse of his house in the valley below. "Even at the worst, I'll drop a spider in their cup of happiness!"

All was still and peaceful as he neared the house. The moonshiners had been distanced in the race, if indeed they had thought of looking here for him. There was no slight, no sound to warn Bion Barnave of impending danger and defeat as he hastened up to his home.

"Mammy! Mam! Tildy!" he growled savagely as he shook the locked door, then dashing his clinched fist against the panels until the sound echoed throughout the building.

"Who dar?" came a startled, quavering voice. "G'way dar, you evil 'sturber ob hones' folks! G'way 'fore I shoot—I got a cannon heah—I has fo' sart'in suah!"

"Open up, mammy," impatiently cried Barnave, rapping again. "It's only me—the master!"

"Deed ef I don't b'lieve it is de chile—I des does, now!" came that spluttering voice, and an other minute saw the door swing open, an aged, fat negress winking and blinking in the light as she shaded her sleepy eyes from the candle in her hand. "Is it you, Mars?"

"Can't you see it's me, you infernal idiot?" angrily snapped Bion Barnave as he pressed past her. "How's the woman? Nothing has happened since I've been gone?"

"Deed dey isn't nuffin' happened, 'cept dat—"

Barnave caught the light from her hand, turning to a room on his right, opening the door and entering without waiting for her sluggish explanation. A quick breath of relief came through his teeth as he saw a pale, wan face gazing affrightedly at him from a low bed in one corner of the room.

"'Cept dat I falled asleep when I didn't know nuffin' 'tall 'bout it, sah!" concluded Mammy Matilda, waddling after her master, bobbing and bowing, her round eyes winking owlshly as she came into the light.

"Shut your head, you old fool," snapped Barnave, turning upon the negress with a vicious show of his teeth. "What do I care about your sleeping, so long as you haven't let this woman slip through your finger? If you had—skinning alive wouldn't be a circumstance!"

"Deed, den, Mars! Bion, s' e'll nebba leabe dat bed ontwel she go 'way f'om it feet fo'most, sah! Mighty bad way—mighty bad way she in, now

I tell you *hard*, honey!" with a solemn roll of those owlsh eyes, and slow wagging of her round head.

"I will not—I *cannot* die!" faintly gasped the owner of that wan face, rising up with spasmodic eagerness, holding out her thin, wasted hands with an appealing gesture. "Take me to him—bring him here to see me, if only for a moment! Do not keep me captive—you are doing worse than murder in restraining me!"

Bion Barnave strode to the bedside, holding the candle so that its dim rays fell fairly upon her face—a face that, despite the ravages of illness, was really beautiful.

"You are not so bad off as you try to make out," he muttered, drawing back with a breath of relief.

"I am dying—dying by inches!" with more hurried tones, twin-spots of red beginning to glow in her sunken cheeks. "It does not show, but in here," and one hand was clasped spasmodically to her side near her heart, "I can feel death gnawing at my heart! I am dying—yet you deny me the only remaining comfort the world can give me! You—I beg of you to have mercy!" Her hands clasping, her large eyes glowing with pitiful eagerness, mixed with anguish beyond the power of simple words to portray.

Her voice choked, and red blood tinged her pallid lips. She sunk back on her pillow with a look of unutterable agony in her haunting eyes.

"Give her a dose of the cordial, mammy!" muttered Barnave, intently watching the pained-distorted countenance. "Brace her up the best you know how, for she's got to get out of this in a hurry!"

"Deed, marster!" spluttered the negress, in dismay. "It done be her sart'in suah deff to eben fink ob gittin' out o' bed!"

The woman rose to a sitting posture as she heard those words. She revived wonderfully, though her voice was still choked, still husky and indistinct as she spoke:

"Then you will relent—you will permit me to go? Heaven shower its choicest blessings upon your head for that! It is all I live for! All I ask! Just to see him—just to warn him of his peril, and—"

Her very eagerness bade fair to defeat her hopes. Again she choked and fell back on her pillow.

With a muttered oath Bion Barnave pushed the old negress toward her, himself bringing a glass with medicine from where it stood on the mantle over the broad fire-place.

"Make her drink," he muttered hoarsely, hurriedly. "Brace her up the best you can, for she's got to take a ride to-night, or meet with worse than death! Work lively! Get some clothes on her as quick as you can, while I see to the horse. No nonsense, now! Forget or dilly-dally, and I'll strip the black hide off of your back big enough to make a saddle-blanket out of! You hear me?"

"Deed I heah, marster, but it flyin' yight in de face ob Providence, so it is, now!" spluttered the negress, gently lifting the head of her patient and holding the glass to her blood-tinged lips.

"All the same, it's got to be done! Do your level best, unless you want to sup sorrow, old lady!" snapped Barnave, placing the candle on the table and leaving the room with a hurried step.

He paused on the threshold to cast a swift, searching glance over the ground, but he saw nothing to alarm him further. There was no one in sight. No sound to alarm him. And a sigh of intense relief came up in his throat as he stepped outside, moving toward the stables.

"Nothing of those bounds yet!" he muttered with a hard laugh as he placed saddle and bridle on a good horse. "Either they've forgotten all about me in their love-feast, or else they think I'm dodging and hiding nearer to them than this! All right! Let them give me a few minutes' longer play, and I'll make the raffle yet!"

He finished equipping the horse, leading him forth and hitching him by the blocks at the front fence, then re-entering the house, at once repairing to the sick-chamber.

Mammy Tildy had performed her duty as ordered, though she was still rolling up her owlsh eyes, still shaking her little round head, so out of proportion with her mountain of body, still mumbling vows and protestations that this was a sin and a flying straight into the face of Providence.

The invalid was dressed, with one of Mammy Tildy's own gaudy bandana turbans placed upon her bandaged head. She glanced eagerly, imploringly toward the door as it opened, her sunken eyes glittering with a feverish light as she murmured:

"You were so long—I feared you had forgotten! See—I am ready—quite ready to go! It is to him you are taking me?" she added as Barnave made no immediate response, fumbling in his pocket for a flask of liquor. "You will take me to him? I *must* see him, if only for a minute! To warn him—to save him from—"

Bion Barnave strode to the bedside, pouring out a generous dram of whisky into the cup which he took from the bottom of the pocket-flask. With rough haste he spoke:

"Drink this, in a hurry! You'll need it before this night is over with! Drink—do you think I'd poison you? You're worth far too much to me for that, my fine lady!" he laughed brutally.

The woman took the cup with trembling hands, draining its contents without pausing to taste them. The fiery poison strangled her, making her cough and catch her breath until Mammy Tildy was forced to catch and support her in her strong arms.

"It's flyin'—'deed it is! Flyin' yight in de face! She cain't go, Mars' Bion—cain't gon' ways!" spluttered the negress, respect and indignation struggling hard for the mastery.

Her words seemed to produce a magical effect, for before Barnave could utter the angry words that rose to his lips, the invalid rose to a sitting posture, gasping breathlessly:

"I must go! To save him—to save—"

"To save your own dainty neck, better say!" brutally interposed the Secret Service spy as he pushed Mammy Tildy aside. "Can you understand what I say, my fine lady? When I tell you that the mob is up and even now hurrying this way with a noosed rope which they swear amidst their savage howls and curses shall strangle the life out of you, woman or no woman? Can you understand this, I ask you?"

Shivering, trembling, wild-eyed, the poor creature listened, but whether she fully comprehended his terrible meaning, Bion Barnave could not fully decide. Still he persisted:

"I'll save your neck from them, if you'll only try to brace up! Summon your strength, and we'll laugh the bloodhounds to scorn, even yet! Brace up—that's hearty!" with a hard, exultant laugh as the woman rose to her feet and stood erect.

He tested her powers no further, but picked her up in his sinewy arms, striding out of the house and down to the fence, accompanied by the old negress, shaking her frosty head and mumbling something about flying—flying straight into the face of Providence.

Still she was sufficiently under control to observe what Barnave told her, and she supported the young woman on the blocks while he settled himself in the saddle. Then he took the frail, trembling figure on his arms, supporting her across his thighs as he hurriedly added:

"If anybody comes to ask after me, swear that you haven't seen me since yesterday noon. Swear that you have no idea of my present whereabouts. And—mind you, old lady!—not a word about this lady! I'll strip your hide from head to heels if you let even a hint drop as to her having been here! Mind—and obey!"

Without waiting for a response, Bion Barnave gave his good horse free rein, dashing off up the valley at a rapid gait, paying no heed to the faint moan of pain which broke involuntarily from the lips of his almost swooning burden.

His evil passions were uppermost on this night, and he showed himself for the utter brute he was.

On without halting or slackening his pace he rode. On until he was forced to proceed more slowly by the nature of the ground. On until a grim figure leaped out from the shadow and caught his horse by the bit, sternly crying:

"Stop! you've got what belongs to me! Give her up—she's mine!"

With an oath of savage surprise, Bion Barnave thrust a revolver almost into that shaggy-haired face, and pulled the trigger! A snap, but no report followed! And then, with a snarling curse, the graybeard tore him from the saddle, hurling him to the rocky ground with fearful force.

Catching the swooning woman, the madman leaped into the saddle and rode away rapidly, muttering and gesticulating wildly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HUNTED DOWN AT LAST.

It was well for Bion Barnave that he lost little time in stealing away from what he intended should be the impromptu gallows of his successful rival.

Owen Tredgold seemed to take in the scene and jump to a right conclusion at a single glance. He leaped from his horse to the side of Glenn Elliston, looking like an enraged lion as he glared around in quest of a particular face, pistols in hand.

"What is he? What's that dirty whelp, Bion Barnave?" he thundered.

And had the false spy of the moonshiners fallen under those flashing, vengeful eyes just then, death would surely have been his portion.

Not an effort was made to complete the lynching after the moonshiners recognized Owen Tredgold. Something seemed to tell them what a terrible mistake they had fallen into, and after that first wild enthusiasm with which they greeted their chief, there was a subdued sort of shyness, of shrinking away from him, visible in all save blunt, rough Mark Tappan.

"We're mighty glad to see you, Owen—powerful glad to see ye back ag'in in the flesh; but, all the same, it's only a reprieve fer young Elliston, mind ye!"

"What has he done to be treated like a dog?" sternly cried Tredgold, with his own hands

flinging off the hastily-formed nose from about the neck of the still confused, still bewildered young man. "Who takes the responsibility of this a'fa'r, now the head whelp hes run off? Not you, Tappan?"

"Ef they ain't no prittier man comes to the front, I reckon you kin call it me," was the blunt, half-humorous response.

"Stop—no more quarreling on my account!" hastily uttered Glenn Elliston, stepping between the two men, a hand on each breast. "I am not worth it, and you are both too good men to get to pulling hair over a mistake. Tredgold can bear witness that I never trapped him, as Bion Barnave bore witness, or—"

"The dirty cur!" grated Tredgold, with flashing eyes and quivering nostrils, as he once more glared around in quest of the vanished spy. "My head on't! Bion Barnave was at the bottom of the whole a'fa'r! My head on't, he's bin playin' us all fer fools from the send-off!"

"Whar is he, anyway?" came a hoarse, strained voice, and John Mahar, his face covered with blood flowing from a gash across his temples, came staggering across the road. "I want to see Bion Barnave—an' I want to see him mighty bad!"

"He was here only a minnit ago!"

"He cain't hev gone fur!"

"He's crawled into the bresh, but we'll mighty soon rout him out!"

"Scatter an' look fer him, close!" cried Owen Tredgold, seeming to accept this sudden and complete change in the demeanor of the moonshiners as a matter of course. "Take him alive an' sound ef ye kin. He'll need to be in mighty good trim to answer fer all that's laid up ag'inst him, now I tell ye!"

There were no further explanations asked for or made, just then. All present—unless it might be Mark Tappan—seemed thoroughly convinced that they had been duped by their spy, and that his neck needed stretching far more than that of Glenn Elliston.

Owen Tredgold simply waited to tell John Mahar to bring or send news of Barnave's capture to him at his own house, then with Glenn Elliston he took saddle again and rode briskly away to meet his family.

When they did so, the night was spent and the day was nearly dawning. And as they came in sight of the little house on the plateau, they swung their hats with loud, clear cheers as they caught a glimpse of Lida, seemingly on the lookout for them.

One breathless moment of doubt—then her glad cry went forth, bringing Mrs. Tredgold in glad trembling to the door, just as she had sprung from the bed. And while Glenn and Lida hung back a little, the husband dashed on ahead to meet and greet his wife.

The sun was well up in the heavens before Owen Tredgold could find time or breath for explaining his wonderfully fortunate appearance. Even then, warned by a series of frowns and signs from Glenn, he said nothing of what had met his startled gaze when he dashed up to the house of his intended son-in-law.

He told how, with the money left him by Glenn Elliston—not for that purpose, but to render his situation less irksome, to secure him greater comforts and better accommodations than were furnished other prisoners—he bribed his jailer to connive at his escape. Told how he left that jailer lying on his couch, bound and gagged, as though he had been overpowered too suddenly to permit his raising an alarm. Of how he opened the barred doors and stole out into the night, once more a free man. Of how he took to the mountains, riding hard and fast on a horse which a sympathizing fellow let him have without asking so much as a single question, bluntly hinting that the less he knew the less danger there would be of his ever dropping information that might be of injury to the fugitive.

"Mebbe it was foolish—I dare say it was," Owen Tredgold said with a low happy laugh as his arm stole closer about the waist of his invalid wife, and his other hand pressed first that of Glenn Elliston, then clasped Lida's little paw as though he would never relinquish it. "But I couldn't stan' it no longer—it was killin' me by inches! I was all the time borryin' trouble on your a'count. I couldn't help thinkin' an' fearin' that you was gittin' heap wuss then you'd let me know in your mistaken kindness, Marthy. I couldn't—an' I didn't!" with sudden vehemence, his eyes flashing vividly.

"Right or wrong, I hed to git out whar I could draw a breath o' fresh air! It was killin' me by inches, in thar! Let 'em come an' take me ef they kin—but they'll hev to take me dead, never ag'in alive!"

Mrs. Tredgold seemed wonderfully cheered up by the return of her husband, and actually forgot to frown once on Glenn Elliston. Possibly this was due to his unusual circumspection. Not once did he try to steal any of those little luxuries so highly prized by lovers, yet so insignificant in themselves when deliberately enumerated by an outsider.

His mind was far too ill at ease. He knew that this move of Owen Tredgold was an extremely rash one, and that it would almost cer-

tainly complicate his case seriously. The authorities would not rest quietly under this violation of their laws. They would spare no pains to recapture their prisoner, and when his case should come to trial, this flight would certainly prejudice it.

There was only one hope—and that founded on superstition!

He believed more firmly than ever that Uncle Jax knew the true story of that mysterious crime; but could he be coaxed or frightened into telling what he knew?

Glenn Elliston thought over his experience with the old negro on the past night, and mentally decided that the hope was a very frail one indeed. Mortal man was never more thoroughly frightened than had been Uncle Jax, yet never a confirming word had been permitted to pass his lips.

He was still musing thus, when Lida, who had been for some little time bustling about, busied in preparing something to eat, stopped short before the door with a little cry, her face growing very pale as she pointed with trembling hand outside.

"Somebody—a stranger!" she gasped, as Glenn instantly sprung to her side, one arm deftly passing about her trim waist in a lovely support. "If he's after father!"

"No one man kin take me back!" grated Tredgold as he rose to his feet and approached the door, despite the efforts on the part of his wife and daughter to check him.

There was a man standing on the little plateau without, facing the house, one hand raised with a deprecatory motion as he caught a glimpse of those within. And his voice, clear and strong, came with the words:

"Flag of truce, gentlemen! I haven't got on my fighting clothes this trip, and—"

"I know you—Curly Rooks!" ejaculated Elliston, with a frown, as he stepped across the threshold, pistol in hand.

"I've seen your face before, too, but that's no sign we need fly at each other's throats, is it?" with a low, careless laugh that sounded almost like a sneer. "Hallo! you've got back, Owen Tredgold? How did you leave everybody in town?"

"Joyin' heap better health then you'll hev to boast of, you infarnal bloodhound!" growled the chief of the moonshiners. "Heap better, ef you come here thinkin' to take me back to perish fer a breath o' fresh air in that dog-kennel of a jail!"

Curly Rooks grew grave in face and voice as he made reply:

"I've not come here to take you back, Tredgold, or I'd have known better than to show my face before you felt the grip of my hands. I didn't even know you had broken jail—or was it a release on bail?"

"Never you mind what it was, nur how it come about," sullenly retorted the fugitive. "I'm here, an' I've come to stay. You try to play any sech tricks as your mates did when they tuck me afore, an' thar'll be one bloodhun' the less in the Secret Sarvice!"

With a swift movement which was not understood until it was accomplished, the detective unbuckled his belt of arms and permitted them to drop at his feet. He held his empty hands up in full view as he stepped forward, leaving his tools behind him. His voice was full of strong feeling as he spoke again:

"Would I be fool enough to openly disarm myself if I meant you mischief, Owen Tredgold? Would I drop my tools and put myself empty-handed within your grip—and you two to one—if I thought of arresting you?"

"They ain't no tellin' what cussed tricks you critters ain't up to! Ef you ain't after me, what fetched you here so mighty soon?"

Curly Rooks laughed softly, a smile passing across his face as he made reply:

"I reckon your neighbors could tell you I've been in these parts for some little time. If you hear them talk of Andrew Turtle, the man who wanted to find Monkey Dick Moss, to—"

"Then Bion Barnave was right when he declared that fellow was you in disguise?" interposed Elliston.

"He'd ought to know my face pretty well by this time," with a disagreeable laugh. "He's seen it often enough while he was waiting for instructions at Headquarters. Or am I betraying a secret?" with a comical assumption of embarrassment which was flatly contradicted by that malicious twinkle in his black eyes. "Perhaps friend Barnave wouldn't like it to get abroad that he is and has been for years in the employ of the revenue service, or that he has done more to break up the illicit manufacture of whisky in this county than any other ten revenue spies in the service!"

"You are lying—you do not mean us to believe that?" panted Mrs. Tredgold, suddenly appearing at the side of her husband, her face pale as that of a corpse, her frail figure trembling with emotion.

"I am telling you the simple truth, madam," was the grave, earnest response. "Bion Barnave is a traitor to his neighbors. He has furnished us with all the information we needed to break up the stills. He was the first one to move in this arrest of your husband. He

brought the man forward who swore he was a witness to the murder of Pandy Rowell—my partner, almost brother!"

"Why do you tell us all this?" demanded Glenn Elliston, his eyes glowing vividly, but his pale face showing no signs of exultation over his fallen rival. "If he is our enemy he must be your friend and ally. Why do you betray him, then?"

Curly Rooks drew his figure proudly erect, and there was an honest vigor in his voice and manner that carried complete conviction with it when he made reply:

"Your enemy, no doubt, but not my friend—not the friend of any honest man! Men in our line of business often have to make use of such miserable tools, but rarely do they trust or associate with them. And Bion Barnave has played a double game, betraying both sides whenever he fancied it would be to his benefit. He has injured me more deeply than any other in the profession, since he has tried to make me take a hand in hanging an innocent man, instead of the one on whose hands lies the blood of my brother, Pandy Rowell!"

Mrs. Tredgold, with a low, painful sob, turned and offered her hand to Glenn Elliston. Faintly, huskily she murmured:

"Try to forgive me—try to forget all—"

Curly Rooks turned abruptly aside, staring fixedly at the fleecy clouds as they floated across the blue sky. Sentiment was a little out of his line, and he took as little of it in as possible.

His keen ear heard Glenn and Lida taking Mrs. Tredgold into the house, and he turned as quickly, at once taking up the broken thread.

"I saw you down yonder," with a nod in the direction of the far-away county seat, "and I both heard and saw you as you denied all knowledge of that bloody deed."

"What I said then, I say now; I never done it, never knowed how or by who it was done!" earnestly cried the moonshiner.

"That was to be expected, of course, but I felt that you were telling the plain truth, and though you may not have thought it at the time, you let drop a word or two that turned my ideas in another direction. Still, it was hardly sufficient to be a clew, and I was afraid to question you, lest my notion should by an unlucky chance get to the ears of the wrong person."

"An' you follered that idee up?" eagerly muttered Tredgold, catching the detective by the hand, gazing almost breathlessly into his face. "You know who done the murder? You kin p'int him out?"

"I think I can answer yes to all of those questions," was the prompt response. "I'm willing to risk my reputation as a detective on it, at all events."

Owen Tredgold turned and fairly ran back into the house, Curly Rooks following with more deliberation, after taking a careful, thorough gaze from the edge of the plateau, as though expecting to discover somebody or something.

So deliberate were his actions, that when he crossed the threshold Owen Tredgold had already told his glad news, and all were quite as ready as they were anxious to listen to his account.

"It wasn't altogether guess-work with me," he said, with a grave smile that rendered his rugged face almost handsome. "But your chance words put me fairly on the track. Long before then, however, I had tried to solve the mystery, but so many months had passed before I heard of my friend's death, that the trail was cold when I reached here."

"Pandy Rowell wrote to me several times during his stay here, and combining what he told me in those letters, with what I knew of his peculiar nature, it was not difficult to fancy an important clew in the sudden disappearance of Milton Sarsfield and his wife. Pandy spoke of a gloriously beautiful woman, and how thoroughly he was enjoying his holiday. That was all, but it was enough for me!"

"I came here in disguise, as a rough, tough old rascal, looking for a deadly enemy, knowing that I could play the part well enough to deceive most men, and fancying that I could accomplish my ends better than in my real person."

"An' you done it? You found out the real murderer?" interposed Owen Tredgold, too impatient to await this slow action.

"I don't blame you," laughed Curly Rooks, with a side glance toward Mrs. Tredgold, and mentally deciding that she had recovered sufficiently to know all without further delay. "I did find out what I sought, thanks mainly to you, Miss Tredgold," with a bow, but without further explaining his meaning.

"I believed my surest way was to frighten the truth out of old Uncle Jax, and so I enlisted the hoodoo doctor, Cunjur King Saul, in my service. The rascal made a botch of it, though, and Uncle Jax came pretty nigh giving me the slip. After all, it was just as well that matters turned out thus, since it threw a still more direct proof into my hands."

"By mere chance I came upon a fellow cutting up precious queer antics on the bank of the river near where Pandy Rowell came by his death, and though he managed to fling me over into the drink, it was not until after I had placed

him perfectly; not until I knew I had fairly run the murderer to earth."

Curly Rooks drew a long breath, then hastily resumed:

"Never mind how I got out. It was an ugly tumble, and I'll have more than one ugly dream over it, I don't doubt. But I did get out, and once more fortune favored me."

"You know I said there was little love lost between Bion Barnave and me; that I knew he was playing both parties false? I had an idea that he was intimately mixed up in that murder case, and so, lacking anything better, I took a stroll 'round his way."

"I found him, too. Found him running off with a woman in his arms, after genuine romance style! Or it would have been, only this woman looked more like a resurrected corpse than a loving elopist."

"Bion was too far off for me to intercept or ask questions, even if the idea had struck me. But just before he passed out of sight I saw the fellow who gave me a ducking leap out in front of Barnave and change places with him, quicker'n scat!"

"Who was it?" slowly asked Tredgold, a strange choking coming up in his throat. "Not—"

"Milton Sarsfield himself!" was the swift interposition, the eyes of the detective glowing like living coals as he added: "I ran him down without attracting his attention. I saw him enter the Big House, and would have followed after to arrest him, only for Uncle Jax. He was on guard, and I'd tasted his lead once," with a short laugh as he tapped his burnt and blistered face.

"He'll get away! You must arrest him at once!" cried Elliston.

"With you two men as my posse, I don't mind trying it on," softly laughed the detective, rising to his feet. "Reckon we might as well be starting, hadn't we?"

"The sooner the better! I want this rope off my neck!" cried Owen.

CHAPTER XIX.

FAITHFUL UNTO THE END.

"COME back, marster! Come back, fo' de love ob kin' Heaben! Sen' him back, good Lor', fore it 'tarnally too late! Keep him f'om runnin' into de mouf ob dem roarin' lions wif ropes in dar fingahs an' eyes what see a gallows in ebbery tree by de roadside! Hide him f'om dar sight, good Lor', an' sen' him back safe to his pore ole sarbent! Dou knows he ain't 'countable fo' what he does no longah! Dou knows the ban' ob 'fliction rests pow'ful heaby onto his pore head an' onsettled brain; den stan' his fri'nd an' sen' him back safe an' soun' to ole Unc' Jax—sen' him back in a mighty hurry, oh Lor'!"

Poor Uncle Jax! He was in an agony of apprehension such as few unlucky mortals are called upon to endure.

After he escaped from Glenn Elliston, he entered the Big House, at once opening the secret trap-door of which previous mention has been made, descending into a dark, narrow passage that ended at a strongly-secured, strongly-made door. He listened intently at this for some little time, but could hear nothing. He cautiously unfastened the door, swinging it open, to find his worst fears correct. By the faint light of a hanging lamp, he could see that the secret chamber was unoccupied.

A hollow groan escaped his trembling lips, for now the worst seemed close at hand.

"Dey's so many lookin' fo' him!" he moaned, leaving the secret chamber with unsteady footsteps. "Dey'll bloody-butcher him ef dey see him—dey won't know how crazy pore marster is!"

Uncle Jax forgot all else in his great fear for his master. Forgot his superstition. Forgot that dread vision of the cross-roads. Forgot everything save that great and overpowering love which had been his sole guide for years—which had made of him a martyr, no less heroic because his skin was black.

Through the rest of that night he was wandering hither and yon, vainly hoping to discover his master in time to save him from his enemies; in time to take him back to his hiding-place before the broad light of day should add to his perils.

"Nudder week yit!" he muttered, with a hollow groan, as he looked up at the full moon. "Nudder week fore pore marster gitsober down ag'in! Kin it las'—kin ole nigger stan' it so long? Good Lor', gib Unc' Jax de stren'th to hol' out! Long as pore marster needs him, good Lor'! Den he don' keer how soon de long rest comes!"

Here and there through the waning night Uncle Jax hurried, looking for the strange being who had rescued him from the rope of the moonshiners; who had taken him on that wild, break-neck gallop; who had come upon him and Glenn Elliston so inopportunely a few hours before. Looking, but without success. Hour after hour, until the night began to fade away into the gray dawn. Hour after hour, while each one passing saw the poor old negro's fear and grief grow greater until it became almost too heavy a burden for his aged and weakened frame to bear up under.

Then—just as the bright sun was beginning to cast its yellow rays over the hilltops—Uncle Jax caught sight of the object of his quest.

Astride a horse whose flanks were deeply scored and bloody, whose distended nostrils and parted lips showed white with froth, whose trembling limbs threatened to give way beneath its weight at each headlong stride, Uncle Jax saw the madman—and none who saw him then could for an instant have doubted his perfect lunacy—dashing toward the Big House a white motionless figure in his arms.

A frightful, sickening fear seized upon Uncle Jax as he saw this, and his heart fairly leaped up in his throat as he gasped:

"Good Lor', grant dat he ain't—ain't done dat awful wrong!"

This unnamed fear almost blinded the poor old negro as he hurried forward, fearing the worst. As through a mist he saw the madman dash on toward the Big House; like one in a terrible nightmare he listened to the wild cries and broken sentences which escaped the lips of the maniac.

"Interpose Dy han', great Lor'!" Uncle Jax gasped, hot tears aiding to blind his eyes as he staggered on. "Dcn' let de pore, crazy, onaccountable marster stain his han's still deeper! Gib Unc' Jax strength to git dar in time—mek he laigs hol' out dat long, good Lor'!"

As he dashed the moisture from his aching eyes once more, Uncle Jax saw the overstrained horse give a spasmodic leap, then halt, its limbs outspread to support its weight—but too late! One choking effort to neigh, then the poor creature plunged forward, blood gushing from its nostrils, its great heart broken!

A cry of mingled alarm and warning broke from the lips of Uncle Jax as he saw and realized what the end must be. The madman apparently caught the sound of his voice, for he quickly turned his head in that direction, and was waving one hand in fierce exultation when the end came.

Still he was not taken at a disadvantage. He alighted fairly upon his feet, and with his white, motionless captive safely in his arms.

He uttered a wild, far-reaching cry as he turned once again to Uncle Jax, but his words were inarticulate. And before Uncle Jax could gather breath enough with which to utter an appeal, the madman swung his captive up over his shoulder and resumed his flight on foot.

Burdened as he was, he had no trouble in keeping ahead of the old negro, whose overtasked limbs were about to give way beneath him. And when Uncle Jax saw him disappear inside the Big House, he sunk down with a great sigh of relief, his brain whirling, his eyes blinded.

The madman paid no attention to locks or bolts, leaving the door open behind him as he entered the house. He passed along and opened the cunningly arranged trap-door, descending the steep flight of steps with that white, unconscious figure still lying across his shoulder. He opened the door beyond, and entered the secret chamber, crossing it and placing his captive on the low couch at the further end, smoothing out her garments, crossing her thin white hands above her breast.

He stepped back, and with folded arms gazed down upon the picture thus presented. Far from an unpleasant one, for that beautiful countenance bore no signs of fear or pain, just now. White as wax, looking like the face of one who is forever done with the earth and all earthly cares. And a form that, though somewhat reduced by severe illness or accident, was almost perfect in its graceful development.

A laugh that was almost a sneer came from the lips of the madman as he took in this picture. One hand lifted and tore the disguising mass of hair from his face and skull, tossing it aside as of no further account.

And, in passing, it may be stated here that Uncle Jax in his superstitious terror had been deceived by this secretly constructed disguise, formed by the madman from one of the long-haired skins lying on the earthen floor; skins from the backs of cashmere goats.

It was this hairy disguise that prevented him from recognizing the wild horseman, though at one time the truth almost flashed upon his poor, bewildered brain. It was the absence of this disguise that reassured him when he returned to the Big House, to find his charge seemingly soundly asleep in the secret chamber, showing no signs of having acted the part of the wild horseman, though Uncle Jax knew he had been out for a ramble through the night; for it was in search of him that Uncle Jax wandered into the glen where the moonshiners were in council.

It was not until his return from the hut of Cunjur King Saul, on that memorable evening, that Uncle Jax discovered the truth of that disguise. He found his charge busied over it when he paid his usual visit to the secret chamber, though the madman tried to conceal it and almost savagely hushed the old negro up when he ventured to remonstrate. And this was why Uncle Jax leaped upon Glenn Elliston when that gray-bearded figure came upon them in the night, his loyal fears making his acting seem no more than the working of his superstition.

The removal of this disguise effected a won-

derful change in the appearance of the madman. He seemed quite another man with his smooth shorn face, and his long locks of coal-black hair.

It seemed as though there was a magic in that laugh, for the woman on the couch opened her eyes with a gasping cry, shivering with terror as she met that blazing gaze.

"Milton—my husband!" she faltered, faintly, with an involuntary extension of her arms toward him. "Milton—fly! Flee for your life! Escape while there is yet time!"

"Milton Sarsfield is dead—murdered by your infernal arts!" came sternly from those thin lips. "It is his ghost you behold before you, vile creature! His ghost—returned from hell to punish you as your crimes fitly deserve! Are you ready?"

"Flee—I must confess all—I cannot permit them to murder good Owen—my mother would curse me from her grave!" panted the half-distracted creature, striving to rise from the couch—only to be pressed back with a savage energy by the madman.

"I would try to elude me again?" he grated, his eyes glowing redly, his lips tinged with froth, his face fairly convulsed with rage.

A faint shriek of terror escaped the poor woman as she cowered beneath that baleful gaze, unable to resist his vengeful grasp.

"Spare me, Milton! Spare me—by the memory of our happier days when—"

"Dare you recall them, woman?" he grated, his sinewy fingers hovering over her throat as though itching to close upon them and remain while the faintest flicker of life lasted. "Dare you ask for mercy, and at my hands? What mercy did you show me? Did you spare me? You and your bloodhound lover, Pendy Rowell? Mercy? You and your evil deeds have blotted the word from my memory!"

"I sinned—but have I not suffered, Milton?"

"What has been your suffering beside my tortures?" was the fierce interjection. "Look at me—a bodily and mental wreck! Think of what I was then, and see what I am now! Then, proud, happy, contented, trustful of all—too trustful!" with another fierce out-flashing. "Did I not trust him? Did I not welcome him and make much of him? Did I not ask you to treat him as a brother dear to my heart?"

"Why did you—why did you not warn me against his cunning, plausible arts?" moaned the poor woman, shivering with horror as she shrunk away from that terrible gaze.

"Why? Because I loved you and you were my wife! Was not that a sufficient safeguard for even a woman? It should have been—it would have been, only for the black, treacherous drop in your heart! Ha! did I say heart?" with a sharp, sneering laugh as he drew back with a contemptuous out-flinging of his hand. "You were never supplied with a heart! If you had, it would have remained true to me, your husband, who loved you more truly, more passionately than ever wife was loved before by mortal man! You could never have betrayed me for that silk-tongued hunter of men!"

"Was I not punished, Milton?" and there was a touch of bitter reproach mingling with the sad despondency of her tones. "I was fascinated, as by a serpent, but when you confronted us, the scales fell from my eyes. And when your hand struck me down—my God!" with a wailing sob as her trembling hands covered her face. "That was bitterer than death!"

Milton Sarsfield laughed, coldly, hardly, mercilessly.

"You think to make me believe that? You fancy you can blot out the black past and cover over your crime by murmuring a few soft words in my ears? Not so, you whom I once called wife! You have come back to pay the full penalty due your treacherous crimes!"

"I have come to save your life, Milton!" with sudden energy cried the woman, raising up on the couch, her blue eyes glowing vividly. "You must flee from this country and hide yourself where the eyes of the law can never reach! You must—for I swear to confess everything, rather than permit Owen Tredgold to suffer for the deed your hand committed! Flee, while—"

"Not while you curse the earth, Bertha," was the cold interposition. "Not while my vengeance remains incomplete. Not until I have exacted the full penalty for your crimes!"

"I am dying, Milton," gasped the woman, sinking back on the couch, the hectic flush fading away from her sunken cheeks, the light from her eyes. "I have been ill and feeble for years, and then—you rode me down with your horse, husband, that night. I am dying—let me die in peace—let me die, knowing that you have forgiven me, husband?"

Faintly, brokenly, with a sad yearning in her tones. But Milton Sarsfield only laughed in vicious scorn as he listened.

"Forgive you? Yes—when you restore me my good name! When you replace my shattered brain—for I am mad at times, Bertha; I know that I am mad—and was it not enough to madden any mortal? I loved you so passionately, so entirely, Bertha! I loved—"

"Forgive me—forgive your dying wife, Milton!"

"I have no wife," was the ice-cold response

as all emotion, all tenderness died out of face and voice. "She died on that bitter black night when I discovered her foul treachery. She can never come to life again. You are only her ghost. And yet—well!" with a hard, reckless laugh as his eyes filled again with that red glow of madness. "We'll see if a ghost cannot suffer tortures such as drive sane mortals mad!"

With blood-curdling deliberation he began his preparations for the atonement. No matter the details. They were too frightful for full recording. It was the work of a madman, and like a madman he set about carrying it out.

It was then that Uncle Jax reached the house, and rushed at once to the secret chamber where Milton Sarsfield had lived so long, unsuspected by any of his neighbors. And it was the hand of Uncle Jax that wrested the sacrificial knife from the hands of his loved master.

"Not dat—not her, marster!" the faithful old negro cried, great tears rolling down his wrinkled cheeks as he clung to the hand of the madman who turned upon him with a grating curse.

"She betrayed me to worse than death!" grated Sarsfield, madly. "I have vowed to punish her as her crime deserves! Who are you that dares to interfere—you black scoundrel!"

"Leabe her to de good Lor', marster—leabe her punishment to de one dat say 'vengeance is mine, I will repay!' Don't take her blood on you' own hand', marster! Don't do murder—don't kill her soul like you kill her body! Grant her time to 'pent an' fin' de bressed Lamb, Mars' Milton! See—Unc' Jax begs dis on he pore ole knees!"

As the madman tore his hand free, Uncle Jax dropped to his knees, his trembling arms embracing the legs of his master, his wrinkled face upturned, hot tears rolling down his cheeks. His voice was choked and his words barely articulate, but they could not have been more earnest were he pleading for his own salvation.

"Did she spare me?" grated Sarsfield, his clinched fist rising and quivering above that black face; but Uncle Jax never flinched, never tried to evade or ward off the threatened blow.

"Set her good 'zample, marster! Show de pore, errin' creature how a Christian gentleman kin fo'give an' fo'git! Bid her go an' sin no mo', morster! But don't stain you' soul wid her life—don't blacken you' soul wid murder!"

"It is retribution, not murder," with a short, cold laugh as he stooped and tore those aged fingers from around his limbs. "The fiat has gone forth, and she must suffer—have not I suffered?" with an abrupt change of tone and manner, his eyes glowing afresh. "Off with you, you black spawn of Satan! Must I crush you to pulp beneath my feet before I can learn you wisdom? Off, I say! or I'll kill you!"

"Kill me, Mars' Milton," sobbed Uncle Jax, but without flinching in the least. "Kill de ole man—he ain't nuffin' but a brack nigger, an' it ain't no great sin to kill a nigger! Kill Unc' Jax, but spar' de pore missus—spar' her to 'pent an' seek fo'gibness ob de Lor'! Yo' got to kill Unc' Jax fo' you hurt her, Mars' Milton!" with sudden energy as that clinched hand again rose over his unprotected face.

"You—you turn against me, too, Uncle Jax?" "Kill me—kill ole nigger! But don't say dat, marster; don't say Unc' Jax turn 'gainst de one dat owns him, soul and body!" exclaimed the faithful old man, with sudden dignity, and a proud uplifting of his white-crowned head. "Don't say dat, marster, fo' it not true, an' it cut pow'ful sight deeper dan you' knife kin cut. What else Unc' Jax bin, he ebber bin true an' faithful to his marster. He lie, he cheat, he steal, he do all dat; but it fo' you, marster—all fo' you!"

"And now you cancel all by standing between me and my long-delayed vengeance!" grated the madman—surely he must have been mad, else he would have never dealt that dastard blow! "Go, you black rascal! Out of my sight, or I'll murder you by inches!"

His clinched fist descended with terrible force, sending the blood in a spray about, but Uncle Jax still clung with desperation of undying fidelity to his legs, gasping huskily:

"Unc' Jax sabe yo' long's he kin, marster! Fo'give him—but it all fo' you' own good—all fo' you, marster!"

Then the insane fury fairly flamed forth, and with a snarling oath Milton Sarsfield clutched the throat of his too faithful servant with both hands, bending his head back, glaring madly down into that distorted countenance, laughing viciously, insanely as he snarled out:

"Die, then, you black cur! Die—and I'll never more be subject to your infernal spying and never-ceasing watchfulness! Die—and over your corpse I'll exact the utmost penalty from your mistress!"

Too old to resist, too feeble from long watching and intense anxiety to break away from that death-clutch, even if his fidelity would have permitted him to employ force against the master he loved far above life, above Heaven itself, Uncle Jax kissed the hands that were throttling him like a dog!

Then the door was burst open, and a lithe figure leaped across the room, clutching Milton Sarsfield by the throat, wresting him from his victim, twisting him to the floor, and only rising when the irons were snapped about his wrists.

And then, with folded arms, flashing eyes, Curly Rooks sternly uttered:

"I arrest you for the murder of Pendy Rowell, Milton Sarsfield!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE TRUE STORY TOLD.

"He nebber done it! Leff him go an' tek cle nigger! Unc' Jax de one killed 'im—Unc' Jax done it all he own se'f, sah!"

Barely articulate the words and very feeble the tone. Throttled half to death, poor Uncle Jax could scarcely crawl, dragging himself along the floor to the feet of the detective, still faithful, still caring solely for the wretched creature whom he had guarded and protected through all these years!

Close after Curly Rooks came Owen Tredgold and Glenn Elliston, with many others of the moonshiners, whom they had met while on the way to the Big House.

Elliston raised Uncle Jax in his strong young arms, whispering the first consolation that occurred to him:

"It may not be so bad, Uncle Jax! If your master is crazy—"

"Ain't crazy—ain't nuffin' but what's good an' true an' noble, sah!" indignantly muttered the poor old fellow, feebly struggling to free himself, glaring murderously upon the human bloodhound who had at last run down the slayer of his partner.

"Because if he was crazy—they never hang crazy men, Uncle Jax!"

"Den he safe, t'ank de good Lor'!" gasped the old negro, tears coming freely once more, his gaunt figure shaken with strong emotions. "He bin crazy ebber sence dat awful night—ebber sence he caught dem two—dem—"

His voice choked, and Elliston tried to lead him away, but Uncle Jax resisted. He would not abandon the master whom he had served so long and faithfully, least of all when he was in such a sore plight. And when Milton Sarsfield was taken up-stairs, Uncle Jax followed him, lying at his feet like a sorrowing dog.

Owen Tredgold hardly cast a second glance into the convulsed face of the prisoner. One glance was sufficient to recognize him as Milton Sarsfield, and he nodded this recognition to Curly Rooks. Then he went straight to the couch on which Bertha Sarsfield was lying, pale as a corpse, gasping painfully for breath.

"Berthy—little daughter—it is you, then!" he muttered, his eyes dimming, his voice filling with tears.

A smile came into her face, and she met his gaze fairly, murmuring:

"Father Owen! Then you haven't forgotten me—quite?"

"It was the thought o' you fergettin' me, little one, that hurt the wust!" replied Tredgold, choking back his tears as he gazed upon that beautiful wreck, looking so terribly near death. "Why didn't you ever send me word—or couldn't you? Berthy," with a sudden glance around at the tokens of a long occupancy, "that crazy critter hain't kept you here shet up all this time? Don't say you've bin so nigh, an' I never know it!"

She shook her head, her eyes drooping. The faint flush faded out of her face, and she looked so deathlike that Owen Tredgold held a flask of whisky to her lips, while he urged several of the men to ride post-haste in quest of a doctor.

A physician was brought as speedily as possible, but before he came, Bertha Sarsfield, carried to an upper room, told her sad story—the story of a wrecked life.

That story was too sad to find a detailed record in these pages. It was hard for her to tell, though she found it a little easier than it otherwise might have been, from the knowledge that she had met her injuries in an effort to right the wrongs which arose from her past actions. Hard for Owen Tredgold to hear, for he loved this woman, the child of her mother, who, in days gone by he had wooed as only a man of his strong nature can woo.

Only Tredgold, Elliston, Curly Rooks and John Mahar were present to hear her story. They would be ample witnesses, and much easier to speak before than all that crowd of curious mountaineers.

She told of how Pendy Rowell came to their house, on a holiday. He never revealed his actual occupation, and they were easily satisfied by one who had preserved to them all the property they then owned.

She told how she gradually became strangely fascinated by the gay and pleasant visitor. How, almost before she realized that she was in peril, the danger line was crossed. Then—she made no effort to retrace her steps. She loved—for the first time, as she now felt.

She placed slight blame on Pendy Rowell. She declared that he had not deliberately tempted her. That he even tried to reason with her, after first attempting to laugh her out of her mad passion. But then, when he was fully convinced that this was in vain, he seemed content to float with the tide and accept the goods the gods provided.

And yet, with her hand lifted toward heaven, Bertha Sarsfield declared that there was no ir-

reparable sin—that however false she might have been in thought, she had never betrayed her husband in deed.

Then she told of that black night. Of how Milton Sarsfield, madly jealous as he had grown of late, came upon them as they walked by the river-bank. How he broke out in a mad tirade, accusing them of crime, of treachery, ending with a violent assault upon Pendy Rowell and herself. Of how Rowell interfered to protect her, when Milton Sarsfield fired the fatal shot!

Rowell dropped in his tracks, his death being instantaneous.

She told how she interfered as Milton Sarsfield dragged the detective to the edge of the bank to hurl the body over, but without being able to save the corpse of the man whom she loved. She told how terribly her cries and sorrow seemed to madden the planter, and how he turned upon her after hurling the corpse into the roaring waters below.

Of how he gave her the terrible alternative of leaping after the corpse of her lover, as he held the fatal weapon to her bosom. And how, in a spasm of fear, she turned and flung herself over the escarpment.

When consciousness returned after that fearful leap, Bertha Sarsfield found herself under the care of a former lover, then a refugee in the heart of the hills, hiding from justice owing to his killing one of a raiding party who broke up his illicit still. Here she remained until she was fairly recovered, then she left that part of the country, burying herself in a great city.

The man who aided her swore to never betray her secret, and thus far he had sacredly kept his word. Through his cautious inquiries, she learned that nothing was known of how Pendy Rowell came by his death; that the real murderer was not even suspected; that he, with herself, was believed to be traveling in foreign parts, old Uncle Jax being left behind in charge of the Big House and outside property.

She said little of her life during the long interval between her disappearing and return, and no questions were asked her. She said that it was by accident she heard of Owen Tredgold being charged with killing Pendy Rowell, and that she at once hastened to clear him.

First, she wished to be sure that Milton Sarsfield had not returned to the Big House, or if he had, to warn him to seek safety in flight before she sought the proper authorities and made full confession. It was while going to the Big House on this mission that she was ridden down by Milton Sarsfield himself, whom she recognized despite his disguise.

She was still insensible from that terrible shock, when Bion Barnave discovered her thus, and recognized her. He must have suspected something of the truth, even if he had not done so before, since he bore her away in secret and kept her prisoner, refusing to carry her confession as she repeatedly begged him. Doubtless meant to place her in a secure spot, to hold until after the trial of Owen Tredgold.

Uncle Jax, in after days, fully explained the part he had played in the sad tragedy, and why it was that Milton Sarsfield had not sought safety in flight to a foreign country.

Uncle Jax had not been a witness of the tragedy, but when he met his master on his return to the house, he gained sufficient from his wild ravings to guess at the whole sad truth. And from that hour began his servitude, his self-sacrifice.

Milton Sarsfield fell into a raging fever, and his delirium was of such a nature that Uncle Jax dared not call in assistance. Alone he nursed his master, and in secret. He sent off the servants, telling them what first came into his head: that their master and mistress had gone away with their visitor to spend the summer.

For weeks he fought the battle with grim death, conquering at last. And while lying on his sick bed, Milton Sarsfield prepared the papers by which Uncle Jax had ever since held the Big House. He intended to leave the country at the earliest possible moment, refusing to let the old man accompany him, gaining his ends at last by begging Uncle Jax as a personal favor to stay and take charge of the property until his return.

That trip across the ocean was never taken. There was a relapse, and from that day Milton Sarsfield was never a wholly sane man again.

He had brief intervals of lucidity, however, during which Uncle Jax prepared that secret chamber under his directions, by enlarging the original cellar and cutting off a portion with a strong wall. And in this underground retreat Milton Sarsfield had passed all those years.

Whenever the moon neared its full, his madness would grow more complete, and at times he would steal away from the faithful negro, wandering for miles and miles through the hills, until the coming of day warned him of danger, or Uncle Jax himself could find him and bring him back to security.

Curley Rooks also had to give sundry explanations, which may serve to clear up several

points which have been lightly passed over until now.

His suspicions naturally were turned toward Milton Sarsfield, by the letters received from Pendy Rowell, and his own intimate knowledge of that man's peculiar weakness. He also believed that Bion Barnave was trying to involve an innocent man, and it required but little investigation on this point to satisfy himself that his suspicions were well founded. While thus engaged, he learned something of Uncle Jax and the important charge which Milton Sarsfield had left him. He reasoned that no negro in that section, would be so highly trusted without very powerful reasons, and when he came to the scene of the tragedy, in disguise, it was with the firm resolve to carefully investigate Uncle Jax.

This was what made him risk his own life in saving Uncle Jax from the moonshiners, when the unfortunate negro had been captured in mistake for the spy. And he was following after to again interfere in his behalf, when Milton Sarsfield, in disguise, effected a rescue.

At the moment, Curly Rooks never dreamed of this being the man he had sworn to unearth, but when he shadowed the lovers, and heard Lida Tredgold arguing with Elliston as to its not being Milton Sarsfield, he made a note of the suspicion for further thought. And it was to hearing what followed concerning the intense superstition of the old negro that Uncle Jax owed his strange experience with the "Ghost Detective."

Curly Rooks had already made the acquaintance of Cunjur King Saul with a view to something of the sort, and had no difficulty in gaining the hoodoo doctor as an ally, by paying liberally for the service.

It was the face of Curly Rooks, carefully made up to resemble that of his murdered partner, which Uncle Jax saw through the veil of steam. And this steam served to conceal the opening of a small space through the rear wall of the hut, as well as the inserting of Curly Rooks's face from the outside.

Cunjur King Saul rather exceeded his instructions after that grim "vision" faded away, but Rooks dared not attempt to warn him, as he saw how well Uncle Jax was on his guard, despite superstitious awe.

As for the rest of the "ghost business," nothing need be said.

Pendy Rowell was never avenged just in the manner his partner had sworn he should be, for Milton Sarsfield was too undeniably crazy for the death penalty to be pronounced against him for his crime.

Curly Rooks had a thorough examination made by competent physicians, sparing no pains to learn the exact truth, giving up his hopes of vengeance only when positively convinced of the murderer's insanity.

Milton Sarsfield was placed in an insane asylum, and through the influence of Glen Elliston and others, Uncle Jax was permitted to attend his master to the end. That was not much longer delayed. Uncle Jax followed Milton Sarsfield to the grave, and then, within the year, passed peacefully away from earth, his eyes being closed by Lida Elliston and her husband.

As for Bion Barnave, he was never seen again in that county. Where he went, or what fate befell him, no one seemed to know.

The whole truth of his double-dealing was made clear in time by Curly Rooks, and when the fact became generally known that Barnave had been at the bottom of all their trouble; had been a spy in the secret service, selling the knowledge he gained by fraternizing with moonshiners and acting as their spy; and that he had forged those papers which so nearly caused the death of Glen Elliston: when all this became public property, it would hardly have been a bed of roses to which the indignant mountaineers would have welcomed him!

So, perhaps it was just as well that he never came back.

Bertha Sarsfield died shortly after her story was told. Died at the home of Owen Tredgold, his hand in hers, his tears moistening her thin white hands.

And it was Owen Tredgold who placed a simple white shaft over her grave; Owen Tredgold who bade the sculptor carve the epitaph: simply her name and age.

Mrs. Tredgold, after the treachery of Bion Barnave was made known, never again mentioned his name. And she quietly accepted Glenn Elliston as a son.

THE END.

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